© *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Volume 21, Number 2, p. 103, (2017)
 ISSN 1534-6104, eISSN 2164-8212

Undergraduate Learning Through Engaged Scholarship and University–Community Partnerships

Kristen L. Tarantino

Abstract

The impact of university–community partnerships and involvement in engaged scholarship on student learning was examined through in-depth interviews with undergraduate members of a student-led, community-based research organization at a selective mid-Atlantic university. Students reported benefits of participation that included increasing critical thinking skills, changing perspectives, and practicing facilitation and decision-making skills. Students also reported experiences of enhancing learning by developing a deeper understanding and ownership of the project. Findings suggest the need for a deeper look at how students are interacting with communities and how that interaction can lead to enhanced learning outcomes.

Keywords: student learning, engaged scholarship, community-based research

Introduction

The field of community engagement in higher education has begun to address, in some form, each of three constituent areas: the university and its faculty, the students, and the community. Each area relates to a particular niche of community engagement. Though recent research trends have indicated an increased focus on the effects of engagement on the community, calls for accountability related to student learning remain. Research that addresses the role of students or student learning in community engagement is most visible in the service-learning literature. Such research points to the benefits of service-learning programs *(Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999)*, ways to assess these programs *(Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Holland, 2001; Lichtenstein, Thorme, Cutforth, & Tombari, 2011)*, and strategies for producing future programs *(Furco & Holland, 2004; Hodge, Lewis, Kramer, & Hughes, 2001)*.

College students interact with communities through various experiential learning opportunities such as internships, service-learning courses, and volunteer service trips. These types of learning experiences have generally been specific and tied to a particular community. Although students routinely engage in these experi-

ences, there are few sustainable means through which students may continue their involvement with a particular community over time. For example, for many students, a week-long service trip is a "one and done" type of experience with little or no future interaction with that specific community. Though the experience of interacting with a community may provide a hands-on approach to academic material or a change in global perspective for students, long-term engagement with a community enhances the quality and benefits of experiential learning *(Roberts, Mason, & Marler, 1999; Wallace, 2000)*.

However, students who participate in community-based projects must have a foundation in the abilities and conceptual knowledge necessary to contribute in meaningful and sustainable ways. Without the necessary background in research or discipline-specific knowledge, students may do more harm than good while engaging with a community *(Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998; Peterson, 2009)*. Community-based projects should be built on partnerships between communities and campuses such that both sides may benefit from involvement *(Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003)*. For students, little is reported on how active participation in these partnerships benefits their learning. This article presents findings from a larger study that was designed to examine the impact of university–community partnerships on student learning. The case under study is that of a specific student organization that incorporates research, service, and academic learning within the context of a community-based project, while also incorporating students as equal partners in the process. Understanding the unique design of this organization led to the creation of a new model for integrating the missions of higher education with a community to form a true engagement.

The present article aims to address two main questions regarding student learning: (a) What is the value for students of being engaged in community-based participatory research? (b) How does the experience of working in and with the community enhance the learning experience for students?

Literature Review

For college students, community engagement has mostly been conceptualized as service. Morton *(1995)* differentiates to three paradigms of service that aid in understanding its role in higher education: service as charity, service as a project, and service as social change (also referred to as activism). For many service trips and volunteer opportunities, students experience service as charity.

These experiences are limited to the time in which the service project or trip is conducted and rarely offer opportunities to understand the root causes of the social problems witnessed *(Morton, 1995)*. In contrast, conceptualizing service as a project allows for a focus on defining a problem and implementing solutions to fix it. In the project model, a true dichotomy is exhibited between the "experts" and the "served," and there is little or no effort by the "experts" to further reflect or redefine the project as circumstances may dictate *(Morton, 1995)*. Service as social change is probably the most time and resource intensive because it involves building and maintaining relationships with the community, fostering reflexive learning, and trying to focus on the process of understanding the root causes of a problem. For students to really develop a sense of service as social change, institutions need to utilize existing structures of service-learning courses but also develop new strategies to create a more lasting commitment to understanding and establishing partnerships with communities.

Students involved in service-learning benefit from the development of skills such as critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and leadership skills *(Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jameson, Clayton, & Ash, 2013)*. Additionally, service experiences incorporated into an academic course create opportunities to connect theory and concepts with a hands-on, real-world application *(Kuh, 2008; Ramaley, 2009; Reardon, 1998; Roberts et al., 1999)*. Similarly, service-learning courses can increase students' personal awareness and understanding of social problems *(Astin & Sax, 1998; Cermak et al., 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999)*. This increased awareness can enhance a student's notion of civic responsibility and the role that the student will play in future community interactions *(Astin & Sax, 1998; Brukardt, Holland, Percy, & Zimpher, 2004)*. However, the greatest benefit seems to lie in the cooperative learning experiences that a student engages in through collaborating with peers and interacting with community members *(Astin & Sax, 1998; Brukardt et al., 2004; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Liu & Dall'Alba, 2012; Ramaley, 2009; Reardon, 1998)*.

University–Community Partnerships

Meaningful student learning that occurs as a result of experiential, community-based opportunities is not possible without successful university–community partnerships. Establishing these partnerships is important for the sustainability of any engaged scholarship effort. Existing literature suggests multiple elements that make a successful university–community partnership, such as communication between the university and community *(Strand,*

2000; Vernon & Ward, 1999; Weerts, 2005) and utilization of the community voice in identifying needs *(Christopher, Watts, McCormick, & Young, 2008; Fear et al., 2004; Gelmon et al., 1998; Strand et al., 2003; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000)*. Partnerships that recognize the importance of building a relationship based on trust take time to encourage the community voice *(Barnes et al., 2009; Christopher et al., 2008)*. These partnerships encourage open dialogue among the community and campus representatives in order to minimize the influence of power and privilege held by one or both sides of the partnership so that equitable terms are created between partners. Several studies emphasize the amount of time needed to develop a successful partnership *(Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010; Vernon & Ward, 1999; Wallace, 2000)*. Clayton et al. *(2010)* describe the main difference between reciprocity and mutual transformation as the amount of time spent interacting collaboratively with a community. An example of a university–community partnership at work can be seen in the development of community-based research projects.

Partnerships Through Community-Based Research

The use of community-based research (CBR) showcases attempts by institutions of higher education to conduct research in tandem with the community. Strand *(2000)* stresses that the role of the community in CBR is one of involvement in every stage of the process. In the CBR model, research is conducted "*with* the community, not *on* the community" *(Strand, 2000, p. 85)*. There are three primary elements that identify CBR projects *(Stoecker, 2003; Strand et al., 2003)*. First, a CBR project is collaborative between the academic and community sides of the project. Essential in both CBR projects and university–community partnerships is the idea that "the needs and capacities of the community must define the approach that the university should take" *(Ramaley, 2009, p. 148)*. Communities have unique insight into the needs and problems they face. Within the context of CBR, communities are the "experts" on their unique situations. The academic side of the partnership (faculty and students), however, also has unique expertise and resources to bring to the table. The key to success is to find a balance between the two sides in order to promote a mutually collaborative process.

Second, CBR projects use multiple and interdisciplinary sources of knowledge *(Strand et al., 2003)*. For the academic side of the partnership, this means reaching beyond the confines of a particular discipline to gain a better understanding of the whole picture. Ramaley *(2009)* supports the idea that "any partnership must

be based on the academic strengths, educational philosophy, and institutional goals of the university" *(p. 148)*. However, the community also helps to provide the whole picture by contextualizing the project, in what Ramaley *(2009)* refers to as a "culture of evidence" *(p. 149)*. To produce a whole picture, CBR projects rely on a mixed-methods approach. These methods include quantitative and qualitative measures of data as well as ethnographic approaches to conducting research in the community.

Finally, the goal of any project is action that results in social change or social justice. Because social change is not an easy or short process, CBR projects are typically long-term projects, the basis of which lies in redefining the project goals as the need arises. Researchers and communities that are engaged in a CBR project must reflectively adjust the project's needs, and students who are involved with these types of projects often point to the challenges of working in an uncontrollable environment *(Roberts et al., 1999)*. Reardon *(1998)* states that this type of research is "expected to follow a nonlinear course throughout the investigation as the problem being studied is 'reframed' to accommodate new knowledge that emerges" *(p. 59)*. The continual process of reassessing the project goals based on the research that is developed allows the project to be relevant to current circumstances in order to achieve the best results for both the academic partner and the community.

A lack of research on students involved in CBR supports findings that the primary avenue for student learning through experiential involvement seems to be curricular engagement: service-learning, internships, and study abroad *(Brown et al., 2006)*. However, the benefits for student involvement seem to mirror those benefits achieved through service-learning courses. These benefits include thinking critically about existing social structures and inequities *(Reardon, 1998; Strand et al., 2003)*, applying learning to real-world situations *(Brown et al., 2006; Willis, Peresie, Waldref, & Stockmann, 2003)*, and learning listening skills, decision-making skills, and teamwork strategies *(Brukardt et al., 2004; Strand et al., 2003)*.

A common barrier to producing successful partnerships in CBR projects is a lack of equality and reciprocity between partners due to apparent social and economic hierarchies. However, Strand *(2000)* found that social hierarchies are largely irrelevant in CBR projects that involve undergraduate students, allowing communities to openly engage and collaborate with students for the length of the project. The ability to build this level of trust and comfort with the students can be attributed to the community perception of students as young, inexperienced, and from a similar or lower

socioeconomic status. Students in turn achieve a greater familiarity with the community and a greater feeling of responsibility and accountability toward the community *(Strand, 2000)*. Though CBR projects allow students to fully interact with and gain meaningful experiences from working with a community, rarely are these projects incorporated into an academic course. Additionally, since academic courses are generally confined to the length of a semester, students do not establish the lasting connection with a community through service-learning courses that they would establish through a CBR project.

A Partnership Between Students and the Community: The Case

The main focus of this study is the partnership between a specific student organization at a mid-Atlantic university and an individual community in the Dominican Republic. The student organization began as a student-led campus organization that provides a free medical clinic in country for a week in January. What began as a service trip in 2004 blossomed into a determination to make a lasting impact on the community. Students sought out a sociology professor at the university, who later became their faculty advisor, to help them forge a sustainable link with the community by investigating the underlying causes of major health concerns present in the community. Since 2005, students have been instructed by their advisor on how to accomplish ethnographic research that aims at promoting ways of improving the health of the community residents. Although the research generated from this partnership will be invaluable to the community and for informing best practices for this kind of student-led partnership, there is currently little reported evidence to show the value of this partnership for the students involved.

In the current structure of the student organization, students apply to join the research "team" and are chosen at the discretion of current members. Although there is some emphasis on language proficiency in Spanish, the team also encourages non-Spanish speakers to apply. Once accepted on the team, students are expected to remain with the team until they graduate. Each semester, team members enroll in a three-credit-hour seminar course specifically designed for the organization. The fall semester generally covers introductory and preparation material for the upcoming winter break trip. The team completes reading assignments, reviews literature, and conducts independent literature research into past and current community development projects. The class time is split

into two sessions: a 1-hour business meeting, which focuses on the logistics of the team and organization of the trip, and a 2-hour seminar at which the faculty advisor is present and the group focuses more on the relevant literature and a discussion of the project itself.

Between the fall and spring semesters, the team travels to the Dominican Republic and participates in a week-long clinic as well as community development in early January. The clinic is operated by medical providers from the United States and varies in the number of providers that attend each year. The community development aspect is strictly the purview of the students' organization and is focused on addressing the underlying factors contributing to the community's prevalent health concerns. The students gather information from community members and engage with the community directly through personal interviews about health issues. The spring semester is typically designed to focus on analysis of information that was gathered during the trip as well as recruitment and reorganization of the team for the next year. In some years, a few students may also go back to the Dominican Republic during the summer for about 6 weeks. These trips generate more data about the particular contexts and concerns of the community while solidifying the team's presence in the community. The ultimate goal is for the organization to work with the community to develop a plan of action that addresses conditions contributing to complex health needs.

Conceptual Framings: Challenges and Possibilities

A review of the literature regarding community engagement has suggested three discrete approaches to categorizing engagement efforts: as research, as service, or as teaching and learning. Each approach maintains its own field of knowledge and draws upon its own body of research to inform best practices. However, there is little evidence suggesting how these approaches work in tandem. Most of the literature reports how two of these approaches can work together. For example, service-learning is an effort to provide new opportunities for student learning through service activities. CBR projects, on the other hand, recognize the need to involve communities in the research process and continually work toward promoting the welfare of the community.

Categorizing the student organization under study into a particular type of community engagement proved difficult in the context of the existing literature. The organization exists as both a

student-run and student-led organization that performs a much-needed service to a marginalized community. It also includes a rigorous academic component. Students are required to participate in a seminar course each semester and earn credits toward their degrees. The team project is by design a research-based project in which students actively serve as the researchers and cocreators of knowledge with their advisor, as well as with the community. Using Bringle, Games, and Malloy *(1999)* as the basis for the framework for this study, the proposed model for engagement efforts includes a way for learning, service, and research to interact with one another in a given community context. As the model is depicted in Figure 1, each triangle represents a particular area (i.e., community, research, service, or academics). The diamond in the center represents the area in which all of these subcategories combine to describe projects that incorporate all of the listed components, much like the student organization under study.

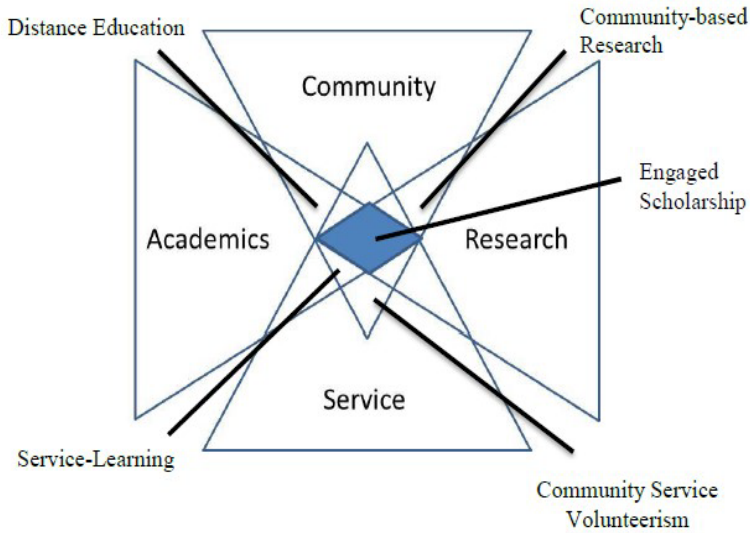

Figure 1. Conceptual model of how interaction among community, research, service, and academics can create a portal for engaged scholarship as defined by the student organization's model. Each triangle represents Adapted from Bringle, Games, and Malloy (1999).

Although this conceptual model has many of the same interactions advocated by Bringle et al. *(1999)*, a difference between the two models is the central area where the four contextual areas of academics, service, research, and community connect. This central area suggests that some engagement efforts incorporate all of

these elements into a given project. The examined student organization would likely fall into this central area. More importantly, this model reflects, from the student perspective, how to incorporate the four contextual areas and participate in engagement efforts. It is this model that frames the findings of this study, as well as the conceptualization of the project and how students have come to understand their role in engaged scholarship.

Researcher Positionality

The student organization under study came to my attention after a presentation of the group's work by its faculty advisor. The advisor presented on how the organization conducted ethnographic and community-based research in the Dominican Republic, emphasizing the value that it would have for the community. However, it became clear that there was no means of capturing how students were affected by their involvement. I obtained permission from the advisor to interview students about their experiences with the organization. Although I was never a formal member of the group, I was affiliated with the university that housed the organization during the data collection and analysis process.

Methods

As part of a larger study, this research employed a qualitative phenomenology case study *(Creswell, 2013)*, in which the phenomenon of student experiences in a unique community engagement program provided a focal point. At the center of phenomenology is the search for the essence of the experience, which is accomplished in this study through "phenomenological reflection" *(van Manen, 1990, p. 77)*. Such reflection is to be understood as retrospective of a past experience. Given my role in interpretation of students' experiences, I utilized hermeneutic phenomenology, which is "focused on subjective experience of individuals and groups. It is an attempt to unveil the world as experienced by the subject" *(Kafle, 2011, p. 186)*.

Given the bounded nature of the research, I also used a case study structure because all of the participants were enrolled in the same organization *(Merriam, 1998)*. "By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity (the case), the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon" *(Merriam, 1998, p. 29)*. My purpose was to use the bounded case from an instrumental perspective *(Stake,1995)*, which allowed me to examine issues that pertain to the student experience within

the organization. This article addresses two research questions: (a) What is the value for students to be engaged in community-based participatory research? (b) How does the experience of working in and with the community enhance the learning experience for students?

Participants

Undergraduate students at a selective, mid-Atlantic university who were members of a specific community engagement–oriented organization and enrolled in a fall 2011 seminar, Community Health and Participatory Development, were sought as the participants for this study. With the permission of the faculty advisor for the organization, interested students were asked to volunteer their participation. Of the 13 members of the organization, five students chose to participate (four female, one male). These participants represent a variety of class years (one senior, two juniors, and two sophomores) and varying years of involvement with the project (first trip to the Dominican Republic through fourth trip). Due to the small size of the group and racial/ethnic composition of the organization, I purposefully did not gather demographic data about race or ethnicity so as to keep participants' identities as confidential as possible. This study was exempted from formal review by the Institutional Review Board at the participating institution.

Data Collection

Each student participated in two interviews; interviews were scheduled around the timing of the team's trip to the Dominican Republic. Students were asked to provide a pseudonym of their choosing so that their responses would remain anonymous. Interviews were conducted in a mixture of Skype and face-to-face formats due to student scheduling and availability. All interviews were audio recorded with the students' permission. Those students who participated in a Skype interview were subsequently audio and video recorded with the student's consent. Ten interviews were completed in total, five during the first round and five during the second round.

The first round of interviews was conducted following the fall semester and prior to the trip to the Dominican Republic. These interviews focused on the students' perceptions of membership in the organization, experiences in the classroom environment, understanding of engagement scholarship, and preparation for the trip. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour. The second

round of interviews was conducted at least 3 weeks following students' return from the Dominican Republic. This round focused on the students' experiences while in the Dominican Republic and averaged about an hour in length. Questions during this interview addressed community interactions, the team dynamic, and moments of student learning.

After all interviews were completed, each recording was transcribed verbatim. The individual transcriptions were then e-mailed to the corresponding student for verification that the tone and content of the interview was not misrepresented. Students were given a week to submit any changes or additions to the transcripts. However, they did not submit any changes. Final versions of the interview transcripts were then used for analysis.

Data Analysis

The students' responses guided the "pattern[s] of meaning" that developed through the thematic analysis of the interview data, not a predetermined theory or idea *(Creswell, 2013, p. 25)*. Merriam *(1998)* explained that meaning making "involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read" *(p. 178)*. Consistent with a holistic reading approach *(van Manen, 1990)*, I analyzed student interviews as a single data source instead of five paired sources (pretrip/posttrip). The interview transcripts were analyzed line-by-line and coded for those statements or phrases that suggested the structure of meaning for the lived experiences of participants *(van Manen, 1990)*. Emerging themes developed based on the patterns in the coding *(Merriam, 1998)* and the focus on identification of the essence of the experience *(Savin-Baden & Major, 2013)*. This interpretation led to the configuration of four overall themes from the study at large, two of which are the subject of this article: benefits of involvement and enhanced student learning.

Findings

Benefits of Involvement

Students reported benefits of involvement that are consistent with the literature on the benefits of service participation. The students involved in the organization referred to experiences that created a change in their perspectives, the development of critical thinking skills, and the development of various group organization skills. Experiences also reminded students of the uncontrollable

nature of the project and that preparation is key but not absolute in the success of the project.

Change in perspective. Students experienced a change in perspective when their responses indicated a shift in the perception of previously held information about the world. In particular, participation in the team provided opportunities for students to develop an understanding of the nature of community development. Lucy felt that her most significant insight from the project was that the change process can be difficult. In her posttrip interview, she explained,

> We've no definite proof that in a year much is gonna have changed in the community. A lot of it depends on them, and so the lessons of outside-in versus community-up change, where does that come from? Doesn't matter how much you want to change things or how intentionally and research based and well thought out your approach is, development is really hard and really getting results that matter to the people that are living there that are lasting, that feel relevant, that they feel included in, really difficult.

Lucy's perspective changed throughout her time with the organization, which she joined her freshman year because she wanted to "give back to a community" by using "all of the intentionality and the research that went into this particular project." As a result of the multiple trips she has taken to the Dominican Republic, she now understands how time intensive and difficult the social change process is for communities.

Christopher had a different type of perspective change. Since this was his inaugural trip to the Dominican Republic, he intellectually understood the challenges he would see but did not fully comprehend the impact of these challenges. After relating a story about a difficult experience in the clinic, Christopher reflected,

> You know, we live in a country that has resources and has the potential to attend to a lot of the same health issues that we're seeing in the clinic. But. They're just not attended to and so [the medical provider] was kind of, we were talking about how she was a little upset about, you know, our stuff's not together, how are we supposed to expect third world countries that don't have these resources to do the same to provide the same type of

> healthcare as we do in the states? . . . I mean it sounds super naïve and probably ridiculous, when I react in kind to this way, but it's things that you just don't hear about. You don't really think about when you're kind of in a bubble at home and so it was good because it kind of like broke through that like ignorance a little bit I think.

This experience allowed Christopher to empathize with the community members and be able to truly understand what life is like in the community. He also called attention to the idea that a typical college student may not have such perspective-shifting experiences on a college campus. Elizabeth also referred to this phenomenon of changing perspectives in college students. She explained,

> It's hard to accept but it's kind of true that especially in college, everyone's very idealistic and you think that everything is always gonna work out and that everything you do to help someone is always the right thing. And I think that the self-critical part of this project and being there and seeing, you know, sometimes things aren't always as easy as you would think they would be.

Elizabeth's reflection suggests that involvement in similar projects can often be disillusioning for students. Experiences in country that do not match up with a student's ideal world create opportunities for students to explore the dissonance that occurs from this disparity and develop a new perspective from which to view the world.

Critical thinking skills. A primary learning outcome for many liberal education programs is the development of critical thinking skills *(AAC&U, 2009)*. *Critical thinking* refers to the ability of an individual to gather and explore various information before making a decision or coming to a conclusion *(AAC&U, 2009)*. Although none of the students referred to this skill by name, it became clear that moments when they had to balance difficult choices with their current knowledge required a certain level of critical thinking ability. For example, Rachel, a native Spanish speaker, described in her posttrip interview the difficulty she had in conversing with community members. Her experience suggests that she had to not only weigh which words to choose but also be able to communicate those words back in a different language. She described the process of communicating with community members as

thinking hard about who it was and I mean you're not supposed to be that subjective but at the same time like you have to be . . . but also objectively think, "Okay, here's the culture of the country. How do I word this so that I can reach the major number of people at this meeting?" So a lot of this was thinking about like past stuff but also thinking, "Well if I say this this way, they're gonna take it wrongly and, you know, completely misconstrue what I'm trying to say." Or just thinking, "Well if I say this then I think the whole team is now like promising that this is gonna happen."

Rachel further explained how she needed to be selective about the things she said so that she was respectful of the culture and the people in the community. She reflected,

> That's such a big challenge because there's a lot of explaining that you have to do and a lot of sort of care that you have to take in explaining. You have to make sure that you don't say too much because if it's somebody in the government, you don't wanna tell them everything and you don't wanna spark any animosity.

The importance of choosing her words carefully forced Rachel to consider not only her vocabulary but also the audience and what could be inferred from her choice of words. Her reflection about this challenge shows how she was able to draw on her ability to analyze the situation critically and make an appropriate decision.

Elizabeth spoke of using her experiences with the organization to guide her thinking about future causes she might choose to be involved in. She remarked,

> I think that this project really makes you question and say, sometimes if the—if you're not doing things the right, not right way, but if you're not doing things in a sustainable way and really putting what the people of the communities want first, are you actually helping by donating to these causes?

For Elizabeth, her participation in the organization has given her the ability and critical lens through which she can begin to choose what fund raisers or charities she donates to and whether those causes are truly helping a community as advertised.

Another experience that Elizabeth mentioned was dealing with situations in country that the team had not anticipated. For

example, in discussing the voting process for community block meetings, Elizabeth described how the team needed to reexamine their approach. She explained,

> We hadn't really come head to head with things like illiteracy. Like, we had talked about how some people are illiterate so we knew how to handle that in the clinical setting, in the way we prescribe medications, the way we talk people through how to take medications, but we had never talked about it in terms of like voting. You know, how are people gonna vote if they can't read the options? And then the stigma attached to things like illiteracy, you know, you're not gonna say, "Who here can't read the ballot? Raise your hand." You know, there's a lot of stigma and so we had to navigate a lot of those issues.

This unanticipated challenge provided an opportunity for the team to reexamine the issue of illiteracy in a new context. Critical thinking skills, in this case, required students to synthesize new information and contexts with previous learned experiences. Both Rachel and Elizabeth suggested ways in which these skills were manifested by the team while in the community.

Group maintenance skills. A final benefit of student involvement with the organization is skills associated with group maintenance. These skills included decision making, communication, and facilitation of meetings. Most of the students spoke of group decision-making and the challenges associated with it. Lola spoke in her posttrip interview about the challenges of navigating decision making when students were highly invested in the project.

> [One] of the best outcomes of that is honest conversation because every decision that is made has to go through the entire group and people voice their opinions respectfully but honestly. So like for example, who was gonna go to the government meeting, that is a decision, you know it seems like a small decision but it's like well do we want just older people to go to that meeting or do we want like a past and present [organization] representation, stuff like that so, and they're very vocal people in this group because they're all passionate about you know what we're doing and just being able to communicate with people effectively and respectfully is very

> important to our success as well as the success in the community.

Communicating effectively among the team members was essential to smooth decision-making while in country. However, since the team never really knew what would happen until they were in country, Rachel commented that "being able to make quick decisions and just thinking on my feet" was a significant learning experience. Rachel further explained this as significant because "you're very much sheltered on campus and like in your usual classes, and like during the trip there were many times when I just kind of like had to make a decision on the fly." The experiences Rachel and the other students had while being in country offered them the chance to learn to trust their ability to make decisions under the pressure of time and consequence.

Another skill that Lucy and Elizabeth pointed to as being learned from their experiences was the ability to facilitate meetings. Lucy confirmed,

> facilitating meetings is just really difficult, and second, some skills in facilitating meetings that I don't think I had previously. It's very difficult to make sure that everyone is heard. Everyone's opinion is heard. Everyone feels included, but at the same time you don't fracture so much that the point of the meeting doesn't get across.

Lucy's response suggests that facilitation is a skill that is less about presenting and more about making sure everyone's voice is heard and respected. Her response also suggests that she may have had the ability before the trip to the Dominican Republic, but she never had the realization that she was capable of facilitating a meeting. Elizabeth echoed Lucy's thoughts about facilitation skills.

> I didn't know how to facilitate a conversation with just, you know, me, one other person and then a couple people taking notes, and you know anywhere from thirteen to twenty community members, you know? So it's a skill, it's definitely a skill because we didn't want to "present," we wanted to discuss. And so it was, how do you start this discussion? How do you answer questions when they come up? How do you keep people from going off on tangents and staying on task?

Elizabeth's response suggests that her involvement in the team was the first time she really experienced the need to facilitate a meeting. Both Elizabeth and Lucy indicated that facilitation is a skill that may not have been realized in the on-campus environment because of the unique nature of the community and language barriers. Lola described her facilitation of community meetings as a significant learning experience, including aspects such as

> the actual manifestation of an invitation, ask people what they think about these ideas and how they would follow through with them and doing all this in Spanish, you know, so that whole thing. 'Cause I'm very comfortable talking in front of a group of people but this is a little different 'cause it's not my first language, and it's surprising how much, you know even fluent speakers have a hard time sometimes, so the language barrier can be a pretty important barrier.

Lola's reflection on her experience with facilitation suggests that the development of these skills is an important benefit of participation in similar engagement projects.

Enhanced Student Learning

Participation in the organization helped enhance student learning directly related to the project. Students reported feeling more connected with the community and having a better ability to engage in future discussions about the community by developing deeper contextual knowledge. All of the students in the study reported an increased responsibility associated with making sure the project is a success. They all mentioned the weight of this responsibility and the feeling of failure if they do not follow through with their plans for the community. Students also recognized the importance of their experiences for postgraduation and how they can integrate these experiences with their current and future academic plans.

Depth of knowledge. Students conveyed how the knowledge and academic preparation they received prior to their time in country was amplified by their physical presence in the community. The depth of knowledge that they gained as a result included contextual information that would have been difficult to learn while at the university. For Christopher, having no previous interaction with the community made the experience of being in the community more salient for him. His personal interactions with com-

munity members were helpful "because now I can kind of engage in that discussion about the people and the life in the community." By talking with community members and being able to see how the team interacts with the community, Christopher stated how he was able to translate his experience into a learning opportunity in order to be a more "effective member of the group."

Lucy, who had been on multiple trips, pointed to the importance of prolonged exposure to the community. She and the other students who had been on previous trips to the Dominican Republic reported that their first trips were disorienting because they did not know anyone. Lucy described her experience:

> My first two trips, I spent a lot of time not knowing exactly all of the details or all of the context or all of the personal information, didn't know people's names, didn't know that kind of thing, and so it was a much lighter experience. And having spent . . . time there and then going back, it was much more deeply layered because I knew personal relationships. I knew people in the community. I knew their families, how many—who their kids were, who works, who doesn't, who is friends, you know, who's had trouble lately, who's the most marginalized, who likes us, who knows me, you know, all of those things.

Christopher can now engage in more discussion about the community because he has some contextual knowledge; Lucy's experience supports the idea that a longer immersion in the community can only make that knowledge deeper. For Lucy, her knowledge of the intricacies of the community allowed her to provide insight for the rest of the team that lacked such contextual knowledge.

Depth of understanding. Associated with a depth of knowledge is the idea that students' learning can be enhanced through a depth of understanding. This understanding is more of a recognition of the larger implications for the project and the student's role within it. Whereas a depth of knowledge included students' gaining contextual grounding as a result of their experiences, a depth of understanding embraces the intrapersonal meaning-making that occurred. The amount of work that these students accomplish each semester can be tremendous; however, the sheer volume of work does not compare to the weight of the students' perceived responsibilities to the community or the desire to right every wrong. Lola described the feeling of wanting to correct all the inequities

and the resulting understanding of the scope of the problem. She commented,

> you come back wanting change but it like—things like sustainable healthcare or like the kind of medication that we're giving people or how we're able to care for them or like really being able to see these projects out in the community, and it's just—sometimes there are so many aspects to one idea or one situation that it's a little overwhelming sometimes, but it's recharging at the same time, or really makes you think, you know?

Even though this was not Lola's first trip to the Dominican Republic, her response describes the ongoing struggle to make sense of her experiences in the community. In addition to grappling with the magnitude of their involvement, students reported feeling that they are responsible for the success of the project and the welfare of the community. Lucy described how this responsibility affected her view of the team's involvement in the community:

> We always sort of make a promise being there, just the fact that we're there and people know we're from the [United States] and that we have to do with health, but officially in words and in writing, telling the community that we were going to pursue these projects was a huge commitment to take on. And I think I definitely felt the weight of that and will for the rest of my time in college and looking at the project, just because, you know if we don't come through that's a broken promise.

The "weight" that Lucy referred to implies that she has internalized her involvement with the organization and feels some ownership in the project. This suggests that a deeper understanding of the complexities of the project and relationship with the community provides opportunities for enhanced student learning.

Depth of integration between interests and coursework. A final illustration of how the team project enhanced student learning comes from the idea that students are able to integrate their learning across contexts and recognize the importance of different perspectives. Christopher described how the seminar course is designed and how this unique design is beneficial for the students. He claimed that the organization is

> kind of a funky hybrid between an extra-curricular and academic class, but I think that balance works out really well because even though it's technically an academic class, there most certainly is an academic component to it, a lot of the work that's done is self-motivated and it's derived from like a genuine passion and interest in pursuing this research further, which is *really* great because it just shows the level of commitment and determination to the project that all the different members have even though they come from different backgrounds.

Christopher's view of the "class" shows that the design of the course is important to achieving student and project success. His response also indicates the value of an interdisciplinary model of learning, as evidenced by the various backgrounds and perspectives of the students.

Rachel's explanation of the project also reflects integration across her coursework at the university. She indicated that

> being in country is where it kind of all goes to practice. So the class really kind of forces me to think about the concepts that I'm learning in like my global health seminar or like the intro to public health class in terms of thinking about, you know, not only the community or the person who was ill themselves but also how where they live, who they live with, the environment that they're in affects them and then going to the bigger level, where they live in terms of the country, in terms of the local politics, the challenges that they might face outside of the community and in it as well.

Rachel's response highlights the ability of students who are pursuing coursework in public health and sociology to apply concepts from other courses to the real-world work they do in the team's project. Although not all of the students in the organization are in the same degree program, the students who participated in this study are either currently in a degree program for public health or premedicine or are considering adding those kinds of courses to their academic portfolio as a result of involvement with the project. The implication for participants in this study is that they will have a higher likelihood of being able to integrate course concepts and theories with actual practice in a community environment.

Discussion

The findings from this study emphasize the student experience of two main themes: benefits of involvement in the engagement project and overall enhanced student learning. The benefits of involvement for students in the organization reflect changes in perspectives, the development and utilization of critical thinking skills, and the fostering of group maintenance skills. Students enhanced their learning experiences by working in country because they were able to internalize their responsibility to the community by establishing deeply rooted connections with community members and reflecting on the value of these experiences for the remainder of their involvement with the organization, as well as postgraduation.

Students reported benefits of involvement that reflect the same trends as service participation data. Astin and Sax *(1998)* found that students involved in service participation exhibited a greater understanding of the world. Student responses indicated that involvement with the project encouraged a change in how students viewed the inequities in the community. Another consistent finding is that participants referred to experiences in which they utilized critical thinking abilities. Astin and Sax *(1998)* also concluded that a positive association exists between students' involvement in service participation and critical thinking skills. However, since the organization's project does not entirely fall into the category of service participation, there may be a connection between student learning and community involvement that extends beyond mere service participation. Institutions looking to create similar programs should consider the depth of community involvement necessary to contribute to meaningful learning experiences, specifically considering the role of community-based research or reciprocal means of community engagement.

An interesting trend that appeared in student interviews was the prevalence of a sense of responsibility toward the community. Not only did students feel empowered to make a difference in the community, but they also became invested in the long-term success of the project. Students felt very strongly that the weight of the project's success fell on their shoulders, a burden that they recognized also needed to be shared by the community. The realization that the community needed to take ownership for parts of the project is consistent with Strand's *(2000)* idea that in order for a true partnership to exist, both sides must be active participants. Similar programs may need to monitor partnerships to ensure that projects are not one-sided. Additional support for students who are involved might require an active faculty advisor who can provide

guidance, as well as the establishment of clear goals between the institution and the community.

Vernon and Ward *(1999)* point to the challenges created by short-term commitments to communities in service-learning partnerships. However, findings from the current study suggest that the longer students interact with a community, the stronger the relationship they develop with the community. An established, strong relationship results in enhanced learning experiences because students are immersed in the context and understanding of the community. This finding is consistent with learning attributed to long-term commitments in CBR projects *(Wallace, 2000)*.

Although it seems that most of the findings are consistent with engagement literature, it is important to note that students who are members of the organization choose to apply because they have the interest and motivation to do so. The depth of their motivation is apparent in their responses regarding their experiences and how they reflect on the impact of the project. It is also important to note that these students had not been afforded opportunities to deeply reflect about their experiences with team members or with any others. Some of the students had given cursory explanations of the trip to friends and family, but few had shared their experiences with other students. Being able to speak with students and walk with them through their reflections created a safe environment for them to fully explore their experiences in an open and honest dialogue.

One recommendation for the student organization is to incorporate more reflection into the students' work. The process of reflection includes "critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" *(Mezirow, 1991, p. 104)*. Students reported needing to digest a lot for research material and discuss the implications of those works with each other. It would be helpful for students to be able to frame those discussions within the context of the community and reflect on how they make sense of those conversations *(Jay, 2008)*. Another reason to incorporate a reflective writing or discussion component is to encourage students to maintain their level of involvement. Several students mentioned that long-term involvement in the community could produce burnout and lead to uninterested, dissatisfied students in the classroom. By incorporating a reflective component, students can revisit the motivation that encouraged them to apply to and participate in the organization.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the small number of students who participated limits the application of results to both the student organization and to other student organizations like it. These results are not generalizable beyond the group of students that participated. Additionally, the intentional research decision not to collect demographic data, in order to protect students' identities, limits the analysis of student learning based on racial or ethnic background or socioeconomic status. As a result, findings that reflect benefits of involvement do not consider students' prior understanding of or identification with the community. Further, having only one male student participate largely limits the ability to demonstrate differences in the data based on gender.

The institution that these students attend also limits the study's findings. The characteristics of the student body at the university may influence the results of this study because students are highly intellectual and involved in extracurricular activities, especially those that are community and service oriented. Student diversity at the institution is also a limiting factor. For example, the ethnic and racial composition of the student organization in this study is not reflective of the student body at this predominantly White institution (PWI).

Given these limitations, several avenues for future research emerge. This particular student organization is not unique at the university; there is another organization that follows a similar structure and operates in a Nicaraguan community. It would provide an interesting comparison to see whether responses from students in the other organization follow similar thematic trends. Taking this idea one step further, if the themes from the present study were replicated, what implications and suggestions would such a finding have for developing similar courses at other institutions?

Additionally, the impact of the international context for the organization's work was not explored in the current study. Conducting further analysis and follow-up studies with students about the impact of the international context may provide more holistic understandings of how students prioritized certain learning experiences over others. How do the current organization's outcomes differ from those that occur in short-term study abroad programs? Does the location, noted by participants as welcoming and hospitable, create easy access for students to develop connections with the community, in contrast to international com-

munities who may be suspicious of outsiders, particularly those from the United States?

Conclusion

The literature on engaged scholarship is vast and tends toward creating specific subsets of engagement depending on the participants and recipients of such engagement. Each subset of literature (i.e., service-learning, community-based research, university–community partnerships) provides pointed insight into the challenges and benefits of producing a sustainable model of engagement. Student learning outcomes are typically associated with the development of life skills and open perspectives. However, the project and organization in the current study moved beyond student volunteer service or service-learning opportunities and brought together the spectrum of engaged scholarship in a single endeavor.

This study provides valuable information about how students understand and participate in engagement projects. Findings from this study can help guide the development of similar projects as meaningful elements in student learning. In particular, findings suggest a cumulative, value-added effect for using more than one high impact practice for student learning within a single context *(Kuh, 2008)*. Merging practices such as common intellectual experiences, undergraduate research, service-learning, collaborative projects, and global learning allows students to engage with diversity, practice working with others, and develop critical skill sets necessary for postgraduation life. Although recent research trends in the engagement literature have emphasized the communities with which higher education engages, public scrutiny related to accountability for student learning is ever increasing. Higher education has as its primary purpose educating the minds of students. Incorporating service participation in student learning outcomes has only scratched the surface of how students may benefit from experiential education opportunities. As engaged scholars, we cannot neglect the student learning that occurs as a result of participating in community engagement programming, whatever format it takes. The unique model proposed by this study provides examples of how students can participate in community engagement and how higher education can further develop engaged learning experiences. If university–community partnerships are supposed to be balanced and reciprocal, then researchers and community members should not be the only partners at the table. Student learning should always be considered as part of the equation.

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About the Author

Kristen L. Tarantino is an educational researcher and adjunct assistant professor in the School of Education at the College of William and Mary. Her research focuses on the environmental

and experiential components of higher education that support or inhibit student learning, including the roles of student development, teaching, and faculty development. She received her Ph.D. in educational policy, planning, and leadership from the College of William and Mary.