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2011 Applied Projects Organizational Impact Report


Heather Carpenter

Caster Family Center for Nonprofit Research, University of San Diego

Holly Hoffman

Caster Family Center for Nonprofit Research, University of San Diego

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Applied Projects Organizational Impact Report

June 2011

Heather Carpenter, Ph.D.

Research Associate

Caster Family Center for Nonprofit Research

Holly Hoffman, M.N.M

Research Assistant

Caster Family Center for Nonprofit Research

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Executive Summary

In fall 2010, the Caster Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research administered a survey to explore the impact of student-led applied projects on client organizations and the local community. The survey is the second part of a community impact study of the Masters of Arts in Nonprofit Leadership and Management (NLM) at the University of San Diego. The survey was distributed to client organizations during the 2010-2011 academic year to assess client organization satisfaction and successful use of the projects. The survey investigated whether applied projects had an impact on the organization's operations or the community, and if so, to assess the type and duration of that impact.

The survey produced positive results overall. Client organizations reported being highly satisfied with the projects, and the majority of organizations were able to implement and benefit from the projects.

Key findings included:

- The majority of client organizations (13 of 14) were very satisfied with the quality and utility of the projects.
- Most of the respondents (8 of 14) either fully or partially implemented the projects.
- Twelve of the 14 client organizations said the projects enhanced community value.

Client organizations provided a few recommendations to improve the project process. Suggestions for improvement included increasing the level of faculty interaction occurring during the process and providing a mechanism for the client organization to provide feedback to the students before the students present the project to the client.

Background

The University of San Diego's Nonprofit Leadership and Management master's degree program was launched in 2002 and is designed to help students integrate leadership and management theories and strategy with practice. The program focuses on developing effective nonprofit leaders as well as benefiting the local community. The applied projects component allows students to apply theories and concepts from their courses to real life situations, practice career related skills, and think critically about how to solve organizational problems they might encounter in their profession. Students are required to complete applied projects for nonprofit organizations in several courses. The students present the completed projects to the organizations at the

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end of the course. Examples of projects include board manuals, fund-raising plans, program or financial assessments, and feasibility studies. Each student completes at least eight applied projects during the degree period. Roughly 30% of these projects are included in students' final portfolios. As of December 2010, students had completed over 600 projects for approximately 275 organizations.

This study is a continuation of a previous qualitative study that assessed the impact and use of the NLM program's student-led applied projects on San Diego area nonprofit organizations. In 2008, 19 organizations were interviewed about the impact and use of student projects. Preliminary findings showed that all the projects were used by organizations in some matter. Interviewees offered recommendations to strengthen the applied projects process. The most successful projects were ones completed by students employed by the client organization (Student-Executives, Student-Staff) where the students chose a project that the organization needed when it was the "right" time for the project (Carpenter & Krist, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the value of applied projects completed for client organizations, particularly in the areas of satisfaction and use of the student-led projects.

Selected Review of Literature

The benefits of experiential learning for students have been studied extensively. Experiential learning helps students gain an increased understanding of theories and concepts, develop career-related skills, and prepare for future professions (Cantor, 1997). However, little research exists about the impact of student-led projects on the organizations and communities involved in the process.

Existing literature addressing the impact of student-led projects on community organizations focuses primarily on undergraduate service learning projects and graduate capstone projects. Acquiring knowledge and building capacity are two of the most cited benefits of both capstone and service learning projects. Working with students provides knowledge in the form of new resources and tools, subject area expertise, and organizational development opportunities (Waldner & Hunter, 2008). These new tools and resources allow the organization to work more efficiently, freeing up scarce resources for other purposes (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Some projects help organizations generate additional revenue, by providing recommendations for new funding sources and developing fundraising policies and procedures (Leiderman, Furko, Zapf, & Goss, 2003). Participating in the project development process provides time for the staff members to reflect on the organization's current practices and procedures and learn (Sandy, Ikeda, Cruz, Holland, & Rice, 2007), aspects of staff development often lost in the shuffle of day-to-day operations. Developing projects with students can help develop a staff's capacity to think critically and problem-solve in the future.

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Working with students on a project can foster a partnership between an organization and the project-sponsoring university. Partnerships can bring organizations new ideas and perspectives through interactions with students and faculty members. The enthusiasm and new perspectives of students can re-energize an organization's staff and volunteers in their efforts to fulfill the organization's mission (Leiderman, Furko, Zapf, & Goss, 2003). Students provide a fresh outlook on the organization's challenges and creative ideas because they hold the role of unbiased outsiders (Blouin & Perry, 2009, p. 126). Interaction with faculty members provides organizations access to expertise, research, and other resources (Leiderman, et. al., 2003).

Several forms of social benefits result from the partnerships formed through the applied projects process. Nonprofit organizations are able to increase their social capital through their relationships with universities. Described as the "handshake benefit" by Waldner & Hunter (2008), the organization-university relationship creates a social network of potential future partners and resources. Gaining greater prestige in the community through associations with universities can help organizations improve their ability to leverage resources (Ikeda, Cruz, Holland, Rice, & Sandy, 2007). Educating students about an organization's mission and programs can provide future volunteers, staff members or donors who are knowledgeable and passionate about the organization (Waldner & Hunter, 2008).

For a client organization (and potentially the community) to benefit from an applied project, the client organization must implement the project successfully. Factors associated with successful student-led projects, in terms of how useful or beneficial the projects were to the client organizations, have been identified in several studies (Worrall, 2007; Bushouse, 2005; Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Schachter & Schwartz, 2009). Communication between the students and the organizations plays a major role (Worrall, 2007; Bushouse, 2005) and though mentioned less frequently, interaction between the faculty member of the course and the organization contact for the project has been found to impact the extent to which projects benefit organizations (Campbell & Lambright, 2011). Projects providing tangible resources and tools for an organization appear to be more useful to client organizations than projects providing only recommendations (Schachter & Schwartz, 2009). Additionally, the level of involvement of the project supervisor can influence how the projects benefit organizations (Campbell & Lambright, 2011).

While aspects related to the project development process may be one source of influence on project success, external factors may matter as well. From the perspective of the organization, implementation of new procedures or plans typically requires change. Bennis, Benne, and Chin (1969) describe several categories of challenges that arise in the process of implementing change within an organization including communication, utilization of human resources, management development, and control and leadership. Specific challenges for organizations implementing applied projects tend to fall within these categories. For example, organizations may not have the resources or time to implement the projects. Internal support for the project may wane after the students have finished the project and are no longer working with the organization.

Methodology

Beginning in 2010, researchers from the Caster Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research designed a survey to evaluate the applied projects component of the Nonprofit Leadership and Management graduate degree program. The survey's purpose was two-fold: to explore the impact of the applied projects, both in the community and in the client organizations, as well as to determine the client organizations' satisfaction with and use of the projects. In creating the survey, the researchers built upon previous qualitative research that was conducted regarding the impact and use of applied projects. The resulting instrument will help the NLM program assess client organizations' satisfaction and use of the applied projects in future years. The survey was administered to 32 client organizations from the 2010-2011 academic year, approximately three months after students completed projects at the organizations. Twenty of the 32 organizations started the survey. Fourteen organizations completed the survey with a completion rate of approximately 43 percent. Three of the organizations emailed their preference to take the survey at a later date because they had not started the project implementation process or were still implementing the project and felt their responses would not be accurate.

The survey consisted of three sections of questions about the projects including client organization satisfaction, implementation, and impact (both internal and community). Satisfaction with the overall project as well as with various aspects of the project including: the professionalism of the project and student(s), the interaction and communication of the student(s), and the applicability of the project was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Very Satisfied" to "Completely Dissatisfied."

The project use indicator included five choices: "Not Implemented," Partially Implemented," Partially Implemented with Modifications, "Fully Implemented with Modifications" and "Fully Implemented." These choices were based on the construct of conceptual utilization described by Larsen (1980). Unlike instrumental utilization when research or project knowledge is considered utilized only when it leads to a specific decision or a course of action (p. 425), conceptual utilization includes a wider definition of use that allows for explicit or implicit use of knowledge. Individuals or organizations may not necessarily use the information directly, but instead general concepts derived from the project continue to resonate in operational and decision-making processes (Beyer & Trice, 1982). Within conceptual utilization is a set of levels denoting both the extent to which the information is utilized by the organization and how the users integrate the information into their operations. Organizations can choose to implement knowledge fully or partially, as well as retain the knowledge in its original form or modify it according to the organization's needs (Larsen, 1980).

Open ended questions were used to explore the impact of the project on the organization's operations and the impact of the project on the organization's clients, the community, and the surrounding region.

Demographics

Demographic questions were located at the end of the survey and gathered information on organization type (by NTEE code categories), operating budget, and founding year. The respondents represented a variety of organization types (when not reported, NTEE codes from Guidestar was used), operating budgets (when not reported, most recent 990 revenues were used), and years of incorporation. The respondents represented the following organizational types: Human Services (4), Arts, Culture, and Humanities (2), Philanthropy, Voluntarism, and Grant-making (2), Public/Societal Benefit (2), Alliance/Advocacy (1), Crime and Legal Related (1), Environment and Animals (1), and International and Foreign Affairs (1). The sample is somewhat skewed toward large organizations; the median revenue reported was \$1,501,129 and the median staff size was 15. Eight of the projects were manuals or policies, one project was a plan, and one project was an assessment. The remaining four projects fell into an “other” category. Of these four, one project was a board interview, one was a program design, and two projects had multiple components.

Preliminary Findings

The survey data were analyzed descriptively using SPSS. Analyses were guided by three primary content areas: client satisfaction, project implementation, and project impact.

Client Satisfaction

The majority of client organizations (13 of 14) were satisfied with the quality and utility of the projects. Ten respondents reported being very satisfied with the project overall and 13 organizations were very satisfied with all of the project aspects including the professionalism of the projects and the students, the interaction and communication with the students, and the applicability of the project to their organization. Satisfaction with the connection to the program was mixed. Though six of the clients were very satisfied, two client organizations were somewhat satisfied and five were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the connection.

Project Implementation

The majority of the respondents (8 of 14) either fully or partially implemented the projects. Of the six respondents who did not implement the projects, the majority plan to implement the projects in the future. Reasons for not using the projects include: individuals in the organization do not want to use the project and the project was not useful to the organization.

Though it is not possible to perform any type of quantitative analysis to explore the factors influencing project success at this time due to the small sample size, the preliminary findings indicate a few interesting patterns. Internal support for the projects seems to factor into whether the organizations use the projects. In addition,

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having the executive leadership involved in the implementation process seems to contribute to successful use of the projects. When asked about the individual in the organization who led the implementation process, the majority of organizations (9 of 14) said the Executive Director or CEO was responsible for leading the implementation and two respondents said the Board of Directors led the process. Whether students have previous existing relationships with the organization seems to influence whether the projects were successful. Eleven of the 14 projects were initiated by a student who was employed at or volunteered with the organization. It is likely having someone to move the project forward after the course has ended contributes to whether the organization implements the project.

Schachter and Schwartz (2009) suggest projects that provide resources or tools to an organization received higher ratings in satisfaction and utility than projects providing recommendations. The fact that the majority of applied projects in this study provided the organizations with tangible resources or tools may be related to the high levels of satisfaction and use reported by client organizations. More than half of the projects (8 of 14) were manuals or policies. One project was a plan, one project was an assessment and four projects were some combination of the listed categories.

While previous studies cited communication as a factor associated with successful implementation (Worrall, 2007; Bushouse, 2005), the survey results indicate communications were fairly consistent across the cases, regardless of whether the organization implemented or did not implement the project. The number of in-person meetings between the students and the organization was pretty similar among the projects. Most students met with the organizations five times or less during the project. Half of the respondents (7 out of 14) reported 10 or fewer communications by email while the other half communicated by email over 10 times. In every case, the students met with the organizations for an introductory meeting. In all but two cases, the students and organizations participated in feedback sessions to ensure students accurately identified needs and the organizations needs are being met. In previous studies, the extent to which faculty members interacted with the contact person at the organization was found to be a factor in successful projects (Campbell, and Lambright, 2011). None of the respondents in this survey indicated interactions with faculty members.

Project Impact on Client Organizations

Time savings was the most frequently cited benefit to client organizations. Eight of the 14 organizations responded the project provided a high degree of time savings and three said the project provided a moderate degree of time savings. The projects provided three of the 14 client organizations with a high degree of cost savings and five respondents with moderate cost savings.

Community Impact

Interestingly, several client organizations noted the impact of a project on their operations could potentially translate into an impact on the services provided to their

clients. Twelve of the 14 client organizations said the projects enhanced community value and several respondents indicated through open-ended responses that the projects had potential benefits for their clients, the community, and the surrounding region. Cited most often was the idea that the focus, clarity, and direction gained from the projects allowed organizations to operate more effectively. In some cases, increased effectiveness resulting from the project allowed client organizations to improve the quality of client services and support, while in other instances; clients were able to serve a larger number of clients. One client said, “Having a better equipped board will make us a more effective organization and result in improved service to clients.” A few of the client organizations expressed their belief that the projects would help them to better achieve their missions, therefore impacting the particular members of the community served by the organizations. One client organization believed the project would help their “program to serve 500 local children and will help prevent childhood obesity within [their] service area.”

Suggestions for Improvement

Client organizations provided some suggestions for project improvement. These suggestions were in two areas:

- 1) **Increase faculty interaction.** While faculty interaction did not seem to play a role in the successful implementation of projects, a few of the respondents noted they would have appreciated interaction with faculty members. One respondent said “Would have been nice to hear from the faculty. No attempt was made on behalf of the faculty member to reach out to us.” At the time the survey was distributed, the program was in the process of having faculty members send out a letter to each organization at the beginning of each project but it is not clear that the organizations had received this letter.
- 2) **Students should schedule feedback meetings.** Though the time spent communicating with the organization was fairly consistent across the board, the type of interaction between the students and organization seemed to matter to client organizations. One client organization, who only met with the students for an information session, stressed the importance of having an opportunity to provide feedback to the students about the project. The client, whose organization did not implement the project, commented that the students should have allowed organizational members to review the final draft before the project was presented to the organization.

Conclusion and Future Research

The preliminary findings offer information that speaks to the ability of the NLM program to provide valuable projects to community organizations. Many of the clients were satisfied with the quality and utility of the projects. Some clients received short-term benefits such as cost and time savings, while others made an interesting connection

between the projects' impact on organizational operations and a projected long-term impact on their clients and the greater community.

Though this study is a step forward in understanding client organization satisfaction and use of applied projects in the San Diego area, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings as well as the diversity of the experiences represented in the study. Continuing to survey client organizations in the future will provide an enhanced understanding of the community impact of the applied projects, the needs of the client organizations, and the factors leading to successful projects. This increased knowledge will allow the NLM program to market the benefits of the applied projects process to potential organizational participants and help the program to provide an even more meaningful experience for client organizations.

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