Service learning in an interdisciplinary capstone: Engaging students in community

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Spring of 2015, students in the Senior Capstone course of the interdisciplinary Bachelor of Technical and Applied Studies program at University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash College began applying their knowledge in an active, applied, service project titled 15-Hour-Project. The goal of this final capstone project, was to enable students to apply their learning, gain real world engagement experience, and become more socially aware of the community in which they live, work, and attend school. Between spring semester 2015 - fall semester 2018, over 1700 volunteer hours have been completed by 115 students within the Capstone class. The purpose of this article is to describe how this project developed into a learning achievement where students demonstrate their skills, knowledge and abilities through service learning and community engagement, thus providing an example for college and university faculty and administrators to develop their own similar types of capstone projects.

This paper describes a Capstone project that has evolved as a service-learning experience and how that project can be replicated in other programs and colleges to increase community engagement. In spring 2015, students in the Senior Capstone course in the interdisciplinary Bachelor of Technical and Applied Studies (BTAS) program at the University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash College (UCBA) began applying their knowledge in an active, applied, service project simply called the 15- Hour-Project. The University of Cincinnati defines a capstone course as a "senior year experience that enables students to transition to a profession or graduate school and continue to pursue life-long learning and social responsibility" (University of Cincinnati, Assessment of Learning, 2018, para. 3). The BTAS Senior Capstone course is designed to provide students the opportunity to integrate knowledge and skills acquired in the program courses to the recurring phenomenon of organizational change in the real world. By working on a capstone project in their final course, that draws on prior

coursework, students utilize their critical thinking skills to help solve issues and help community-based organizations provide needed services.

The BTAS Senior Capstone is a summation course all students take to complete the BTAS program. "Service learning [is] a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the 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" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). The objective in adding a service learning project as the Senior Capstone course final project was to enable students to apply their learning in a real world experience and become more socially engaged in the needs of the community in which they live, work, and attend school.

UCBA is a regional campus within the University of Cincinnati (UC) system. It offers over 50 associate degrees and two bachelor degrees to over 5,000 students. UCBA is located 11 miles north of the main UC campus, in the city of Blue Ash, a northern suburb of the greater Cincinnati, Ohio region. The BTAS began in fall 2011, and allows students with a technical or applied associate degree to be admitted as juniors and complete an Applied Administration, BTAS degree, in 60 semester credit hours which is equivalent to two years (full-time) of academic work. The BTAS degree at UCBA averages enrollment of 93 students. The program includes courses in business, communication, statistics, and e-media as part of the interdisciplinary degree. Most UCBA BTAS students are non-traditional students with 10 or more years in the workforce. Many students need a bachelor degree to advance in their professions. Non-traditional students are typically over the age of 24, balancing work and family responsibilities, returning to post- secondary education after a break from high school or previous college, and are financially independent with regards to financial aid (Horn & Carroll, 1996; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015).

Engaging our bachelor students with the community exemplifies our college values. UCBA's guiding statements identify core values of "comprehensive education that develops critical thinking and engaged citizenry… diversity in experiences and perspectives…and service to the broader community" (University of Cincinnati, Guiding Statements, 2018, para. 2). The University, as a whole has a commitment to experiential learning. "Service Learning is part of experiential learning" (Gallagher & McGorry, 2018, p. 468). Thus, adding this project to the Senior Capstone

course provides students with an opportunity to engage in the community through service learning. As a regional campus engaging with our community is vital to a supportive relationship with the community. The college vision statement clearly states that the college will strive to inspire "students to unlock their potential and contribute to the local and global communities" (University of Cincinnati, Guiding Statements, 2018, para. 4). Students engaging with local organizations build relationships and networks beneficial to the community, college, and students.

The purpose of this article is to describe the 15-Hour-Project that engaged students with community partners, thus providing an example for college and university faculty and administrators to develop their own similar types of capstone projects. In Langley-Turnbaugh and Neikirk's 2018 article, they asked, "How can we prepare students to think differently about the full range of health issues, from wellness to care and policy? And how can the university contribute to community understanding and solutions?" (p. 133). Langley-Turnbaugh and Neikirk's project focused on the heroin crisis in their region. When developing the 15-Hour-Project my questions were similar, but with a broader focus. I wanted the Senior Capstone course to be more meaningful for students through community engagement and service learning. And I wanted students to apply their knowledge through service learning and community engagement to benefit their chosen organizations. This paper will describe the 15-Hour-Project, project impact, project results, lessons learned, and future plans for service learning in a capstone and other interdisciplinary courses.

The 15-Hour-Project

Prior to the inclusion of the 15-Hour-Project into the Senior Capstone course, students read and presented on prescribed cases. Looking for ways to incorporate a learning experience that engaged the students in applied active learning, the idea of service learning surfaced. In the spring of 2015 after two years of teaching the course in a primarily case-based method the 15-Hour-Project was added to the Senior Capstone course as the final course project.

The 15-Hour-Project requires students to demonstrate their learning experience through a reflective paper that includes an analysis of the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT), along with recommendations for improvements. Students develop a professional quality poster detailing their experience with the community

partner and conduct a formal presentation of their findings to a body of their peers and the community partners. Through these learning activities students acquire knowledge, analyze issues, and apply skills (Gallagher & McGorry, 2015; Cress, 2009).

Faculty mentor the student to learn through this service opportunity. The faculty role is to introduce the project, describe the goals and objectives. Then, list examples of organizations that would be appropriate to approach to volunteer and describe the steps to contacting organizations. Also, provide examples of past projects, assign reflective assignments to enhance the learning and support students throughout the project.

During the first class meeting of the term, students are introduced to the project. Instructions are provided (Appendix A) to students along with a discussion of how to choose an organization. It is the student's responsibility to contact the organization, of the student's choice, and work with the community partner to help fill a need. Students are required to have individual conferences with the course instructor, either in person, via online conference, or phone within the first three weeks of the term. In this conference, students identify the organization where they plan to volunteer, who will supervise and sign off on the documentation of hours, provide contact information for the organization and supervisor, and explain how they plan to complete their hours and the project requirements. Often students come to the meeting with no idea where to volunteer. They express they have never done anything like this and they are unclear where to begin. Faculty discuss with the student their passions and where they think they could bring value through service. Once students understand they can work with an organization that has meaning to them personally, students show enthusiasm for the idea.

The 15-Hour-Project enables students to demonstrate program and course learning outcomes. The program learning outcomes require students to demonstrate 1) leadership skills in his/her field, 2) apply team building and decision making skills to class projects, 3) evaluate the implications of emerging media trends in communication and workplace practices, and 4) communicate effectively both orally and in writing. The course learning outcomes ask students to develop a means to apply the appropriate decision-making process(es) to develop alternative solutions, then utilize a selection process to choose the best alternative to resolve the problem, and

develop an implementation process, timeline, and report, and present the findings using an appropriate oral and written presentation format.

Project Requirements The project components required for credit are 1) student conference with instructor, 2) attend library instruction and develop annotated bibliography for literature review, 3) journal reflections, 4) service hours documentation sheet signed by organization supervisor, 5) project paper, and 6) poster presentation. Students review organizations to fulfill their 15 hours and make contact with them about how they could help them. Students are required to write a paper detailing what needs the organization meets in the community, their role as a volunteer, and conduct a SWOT analysis of the organization which they can share to help the organization with opportunities for improvement. Students are required to do a literature review as a part of the paper to see the role the organization plays in the greater global community and the importance of the actions. Students also evaluate their own effectiveness and knowledge gained through this experience. Ultimately students present their individual service learning project in a poster presentation to their class for evaluation and then at a community partner reception where the work is shared with the organizations. The Poster is the visual evidence of the community partner's role in the community, the volunteer role the student served, the SWOT analysis, and the student's recommendations. The poster presentations enable students to articulate the impact the project had on them personally.

Reflection and Assessment Students are required to write reflective journals throughout the process. This allows them to document their learning and contemplate the experience. These reflections support the final paper and poster. Reflection is a critical component to enable students to analyze their learning experience. The project paper and poster files are archived in ePortfolios that students build and curate work throughout the program. These ePortfolios are then used for program and course assessment. This is a tool students can use to demonstrate their work to others. In 2017, students were asked to add reflective videos to their ePortfolios to capture ability to articulate their learning in a digital format. The digital recording enhances the reflective activity and provides a useful artifact of evidence for assessment of the project after the class is over. The

assessment of the ePortfolios have demonstrated to faculty and administrators the relevant impact of the service learning projects.

Project Impact

Relevant engagement How can a Senior Capstone course be more meaningful for students through community engagement and service learning? The 15-Hour-Project addresses the need for students to engage with their community in a professional way and serve others. Thus, educating responsible citizens, not just students with credentials (Boyer, 1994). Through service learning we can link campus talent, our students, to local problems (Boyer, 1994). Because students in this program are usually non-traditional aged working adults, participating in a traditional co-op or internship as an experiential learning experience is not practical.

Requiring the 15-Hour-Project in the Senior Capstone class provides students the opportunity and reason to make a connection with their community. Students express that they want to volunteer and this provides them a reason they can justify to their family. When a student is balancing work, school, and family, it is often difficult to explain to family and friends why they want to spend time doing something that takes them away from them. Bean and Metzner's (1985) study has been foundational in describing the obstacles nontraditional student's experience in completing higher education. Integrating service learning into the course as a requirement provides students the opportunity to serve others and receive credit for the time spent. Additionally, the service learning increases school engagement for the student (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Geller, Zuckerman, & Seidel, 2016); and allows the faculty member to act as a reflective practitioner applying theory to knowledge and practice in the project activities (Boyer, 1996).

In an effort to make the course more meaningful, the 15-Hour-Project empowered students to look for community needs in which they were passionate. In identifying a community need and how they can help, students demonstrate skills of leadership and collaboration. An important goal of service learning in the Senior Capstone is to serve a community need and "develop commitment to giving back to the community for our graduating seniors" (Gallagher & McGorry, 2015, p. 471). In the spring terms of 2016, 2017, and 2018, students were encouraged to present their projects at a student research conference held at the college. This ability to present their work at a conference built confidence in the students and provided another outlet to share their experience with others. In fall 2017

and fall 2018, the class participated in a Campus Compact grant. This added to the experience by adding the funding element to the project, which caused students to think about how agencies receive funds and have to decide how to use them. Inviting community partners to the final class and reception added another professional dimension to the project.

The Senior Capstone course became more meaningful for students because it enabled them to apply their acquired skills to a community need. Through the project analysis and reflections, they could see the evidence of their contribution. A Senior Capstone course can be more effective and experiential when the assignment is relevant and the service to the community is documented and reflected upon by the students. "Indeed, civic learning that includes knowledge, skills, values, and the capacity to work with others on today's challenges can help increase the number of informed, thoughtful, and public-minded citizens who are well prepared to contribute to society" (Benenson & Maldow, 2017, p. 886). The relationships students build with the community partners allow them to bridge from the college classroom to the community classroom and maintain a connection to service learning and life-long learning after leaving the college classroom.

Practical application How can students apply their skills, knowledge and abilities through service learning and community engagement to benefit their chosen organizations? Future employees need to be able to demonstrate to future employers their skills, knowledge and ability. This becomes problematic if all one has to show is a multiple-choice test or homework activity. However, if the student has real world experience, employers become interested in what students can "do" for them. A Senior Capstone course is used to summarize years of learning into one course or term. This course asks students to apply their leadership, collaboration, communication, and planning skills to help with a community need. Students have built websites, donation portals, online information forms, tracking forms, and provided physical assistance where needed. They have applied classroom skills to formulating plans for events for fundraising, food distribution, community care services, health services, and support when agencies are short of volunteers. Maybe most important, they learn that they have time, talent, and skills that community partners can utilize. From a business perspective students can actually show an employer what they can do with the knowledge they have gained in the classroom. From an intellectual perspective students engage and see that they have meaningful,

useful skills not only for a pay-check, but to be socially responsible and to build community capital. Batenburg (1995) suggested that for agencies successful partnerships include the "tasks of an agency: provid[ing] direct service, educat[ion] and generate friends and resources" (p. 12). The 15-Hour-Project aims to fulfill each of these goals and develop life-long social responsibility while sharing student skills through service.

Project Results

Service learning benefits students and community organizations. Lockeman and Pelco (2013) looked at "the relationship between service learning and degree completion" and found in their study that students enrolled in service learning courses earned more credits, had a higher GPA and graduated at a higher rate. "Student characteristics commonly associated with persistence and degree completion include academic preparedness, gender, race/ethnicity, financial aid, and concern about financing college" (Lockeman & Pelco, 2013, p. 19). Geller, Zuckerman, and Seidel (2016) investigated the benefits of service learning partnerships to community-based organizations, CBO's, to illustrate that not only is it of benefit to the students, but also to the organization. "'Service' and the 'learning' components of service-learning are in fact mutually reinforcing" (152). Batenburg (1995) found in interviews with nonprofits that "agency personnel also tend to be committed to promoting the life-long habit of service and volunteerism… [to] enrich society and individual lives in the future" (p. 11).

Community Engagement The benefit to the community is evidenced in the over 1770 hours volunteered by 115 students since spring 2015, the beginning of the project. In fall 2018, 300.75 volunteer hours were completed by 17 students, 45 hours more than the 255 hours required of the students. This is evidence that students put in more hours than the required amount for credit on the project. According to Independent Sector, volunteer hours were valued at $24.69 per hour in 2017, up from $23.56 in 2015, (Independent Sector, April 2018). Using $24 as an approximation of value, students have provided over $40,000 worth of time and talent to the community agencies. The relationships continue to grow and have flowed into other classes. Students often continue to volunteer after they complete the course and graduate from the college.

Grant work Fall 2017 and fall 2018 the course received Pay It Forward grants organized through Ohio Campus Compact of $1,000 to re-

grant to two non- profit organizations. Through this grant component students learned to write request for funding proposals, work with organizations on identifying needs to fund, and work with their class teams to decide how to allocate grant funds. "Within student philanthropy courses…students study social issues in the community and make decisions about distributing funds to nonprofit organizations" (Benenson & Moldow, 2017, p. 886). This is an experiential education strategy that integrates academic study and community service. Students vote after the class poster presentations, where students pitch how their organization could benefit from the $500. The instructor does not vote. Each student votes through an anonymous ballet for two organizations to grant the funds, and the two organizations with the most votes are allocated the funds. A community partner reception is held as the last class meeting, posters are displayed and the funds are awarded at this reception. This event has added meaning to the project allowing students to demonstrate their work to a larger population of the college and the community. It has allowed the students and the college to build relationships with community partners.

Tangible outcomes (Langley-Turnbaugh & Neikirk, 2018) from student projects have included: Online services for organizations such as a newsletter for a family support group at a local children's hospital, an online volunteer form for a community park system, and a donation portal for an animal rescue. The $2,000 in Pay It Forward grants allocated to four agencies to provide needed services is an important outcome. The individual $500 grants funded: a local food garden supplies to grow vegetables for local food pantries, a magic moment program at a memory care facility, art supplies for an organization that helps people suffering from addiction and depression, and a night out program for aging adults who are lonely. The student who worked with the memory care facility continues to volunteer along with other members of their family, and now works with a program called OMA, Opening Minds through Art with the facility residents.

Students have continued to serve and leverage the experiences on social media such as LinkedIn and Twitter, which provides visibility for the organizations and the college. One hundred-fifteen students have presented their work through poster presentations, some at conferences and others at the community partner receptions. One student won the poster contest at a student research conference. The volunteer hours have surpassed 1700, at a value over $40,000 in volunteer time. The project has resulted in an

impact on the students and community, and yet there is an opportunity to continue improving and learning from the experience.

Lessons Learned

Some important lessons have been learned through review of the project. One lesson is how important student choice and passion are to the depth of commitment the student has to the project. In this course assignment, student choice is part of the project. Specific agencies are not prescribed. Students are asked to identify a community need and determine how they can help. This becomes an exercise in social responsibility. First, identifying needs in their community, then how they can engage and help with the need. One question that almost always comes up is what if they contact the organization and they do not need any help. This is the first learning step, learning how non-profits use volunteers to staff mostly unpaid positions and provide their services to the community. "It is appropriate for an agency to turn down prospective volunteers… [when] skills, talents or temperament of the volunteer are mismatched with the work or needs of the agency [or if] the agency simply doesn't need what the volunteer is offering" (Batenburg, 1995, p. 14). Students also learn how volunteer recruitment and utilization is handled. Volunteer management has been the topic of many project's SWOT analysis. Allowing the students to choose the organization has provided a much more robust of list of organizations than one individual could have developed. The breadth of the community partners has ranged from soup kitchens, 5k runs, Alzheimer foundations, nature parks, river clean-up, homeless street papers, to web development for a wolf rescue center.

The variety of community partners stems from student interest and passion. The reasons students choose an agency range from the hours to serve fit their schedule to they like the idea of the service provided. Incorporating a literature search relevant to the student's project and agency, helps students discover the importance of the need the community partner is fulfilling. Assigning an annotated bibliography for students to start research early in the project process helps inform their work along with the final paper they produce. Some students have even used this research to help them develop their deliverable to the agency. For instance, a student developed a newsletter for a family support group of parents and family members of children with a lifelong disease. The student reviewed other similar organizations and how they organized and disseminated their

newsletter. This was a benefit to the organization, who didn't have anyone to design a newsletter for them, but had wanted to start one.

From an organization and faculty perspective, having assignments that students work on throughout the term help build the project's depth. First a student- faculty conference is a must; a meeting where the students talk one on one with the faculty member and explain why they chose their organization and how they plan to accomplish the tasks, develops a sense of importance in the project and allows the student to ask questions specific to their project idea. On occasion, some students have tried to skip this or delayed the meeting and it has negatively impacted their ability to get organized. Students need to articulate how they plan to complete their hours. When students layout a plan for volunteering every Tuesday for two hours or five Saturdays for three hours, they are much more likely to stay engaged. Even if the student has to adjust their volunteer time, because something comes up, they have a plan to work with to adjust.

Discussions of potential obstacles early and often help students have more successful experiences. For instance, some organizations may require background checks and this can push the start date later into the term making it difficult for students to complete their hours. Usually organizations working with children, such as a library, or patient related care will require background checks. Often the background checks are quick, but depending on the method used it could take a few weeks. Once students are into their project, planning for the poster and paper are good ways to keep them on task. Planning an event where the community partners and students share their experience brings the learning full circle.

Future Plans and Conclusion

Future and in progress research plans include surveying community partners for additional ways to add value with our project, improve project goals, and learning strategy reinforcing meaningful service; a case study of the project papers to code for themes of student take-aways; and a SWOT analysis of themes from reflective essays of capstone students.

For those already invested in service learning this should serve to reinforce what they already know, and for those new to the concept hopefully it is an example that service learning can provide a meaningful learning experience for students and serve the community. For me as a faculty member, I have learned more about incorporating service learning into my curriculum. I have participated in a service learning institute at my

university and joined a higher education list serve that shares information on service learning. Most recently, I incorporated service learning into an ethical leadership course where students developed a hygiene and paper product drive to support a local organization which helps families in the local k-12 district. This relationship with the agency continued as one student joined one of their planning boards and another plans to complete their Capstone 15-Hour- Project with the same organization. Service learning fosters student success when students engage with the material and the community they hope to serve and work. Service Learning is an effective method of engaging students in applied learning, empowering them to utilize their skills to make a difference in their community.

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Appendix A

Project: The project addresses communication, critical thinking, ethical social responsibility and the appreciation of the diversity of the human experience. The goal of this project is to link the program to the real world in a meaningful way.

- You will choose an organization, not for profit, with which to complete 15 hours of volunteered community service by Week 13. You will need the service hour's document, signed by someone at the organization each time you volunteer. Separate document attached.

- You will notify me of your chosen organization by Week 3 class meeting, this means prior to class time. You will need to set up a phone or office conference with me outside of class to discuss your chosen organization and your plan (See my office hours).

Students will:

Project Paper
- Identify a community need(s)
- Volunteer 15 hours with a nonprofit agency
- Interact with people in the nonprofit sector (research, interviews, site visits, in-class presentations by non-profits)
- Respond to reflective questions (optional)
- Issue and evaluate Request for Funding Proposals (RFPs)
- Engage in a group decision-making process to award funds.
- Incorporate social media & technology into the process (i.e. blog, website, Facebook)
- Present awards to funded agencies.
- You will write a report discussing the SWOT, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats with your recommendations for this organization based on your experience.
- The report will be presented along with a Poster presentation in Week 14/15 during class or at the UCBA research conference; instructor will schedule presentations.
- Specifications for the poster and presentation:
- The poster provides a means for a formal presentation of your report.
- Posters must be complete and professional in appearance.
- Tri-fold Poster board or Cardboard Material
- No hand writing on the board.
- This can be a group presentation see me if you are interested in doing this as a team. Students may work

Paper outline

individually or in groups (maximum of 4 per group) to create a presentation that reflects your experience.

Although you may work as a group for the presentation, each student is expected to demonstrate their contribution to the poster and turn in an individual report document.

- The presentation should be creative and highlight the most interesting findings from your project.
- Students should be prepared to present 3-5 minutes regarding their poster and project to evaluators of the posters.
- The posters will be set up for members outside of our class to view and ask questions.
- The paper is due with the poster.

1. Introduction: Name of organization, what was your role/responsibility
2. What did you learn about the organization and its clients?
3. What was the most significant thing you learned?
4. Literature Review
5. Detail the strengths of the organization-why it is important in the community and/or what does it do effectively?
6. What did you do that was effective or ineffective in your role?
7. What were the weaknesses or ineffective operations you observed?
8. What were opportunities for improvement for the organization?
9. What do you see as threats to the operation of the organization?
10. Apply what you know, what would you recommend in light of your experience?
11. In conclusion, reflect on how this experience was beneficial to you and the organization.

Ideally, you will use this opportunity to integrate yourself into the community through service involvement in a project working with disenfranchised people, for example people in poverty or people with developmental disabilities. This provides you with meaningful contacts in the community as well as experience in working with professionals and residents of the community on a common goal.