Applied Projects Organizational Impact Report
Executive Summary

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Overview

Student learning outcomes and student satisfaction of nonprofit management graduate degree programs have received much attention recently from researchers. However, little research examines the community impact of such programs.

This report summarizes findings from a community impact study of the Masters of Arts in Nonprofit Leadership and Management at the University of San Diego. An extensive qualitative study was conducted to determine whether student-led applied projects conducted for nonprofit organizations had an impact on those organizations, and if so, to assess the type and duration of that impact.

Since the inception of the NLM program through September 2007, 276 projects were completed for 130 nonprofit organizations. From September 2008 through May 2009 researchers interviewed 19 of these organizations. The 19 organizations varied in size and mission. The table below shows the demographics of organizational respondents in total revenue and number of Full Time Equivalent Employees (FTE).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size (In total revenue)</th>
<th>Size (# of FTE Staff)</th>
<th>Number of Projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>≤ 500,000</td>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501,000 to 999,999</td>
<td>3 to 12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000,000 to 2,999,999</td>
<td>4 to 21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 3,000,000</td>
<td>145 to 1000</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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Findings

The findings indicated that all of the projects were used in some form.

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Student and Client Motivation for Embarking on the Project

Students or organizations initiated projects for a variety of reasons, mainly to:

• Diversify funding sources
• Be strategic
• Attempt to measure impact
• Expand relations in the community
• Expand facilities
• Build an endowment
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- Develop legislation
- Create and formalize existing policies
- Have constituents work together on common issues
- Provide support to current staff and volunteers
- Reach more constituents
- Create a new program
- Build the capacity of an emerging nonprofit organization

**Team Interaction and Student Involvement with Client Organizations**

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.

- Several of the Student-Executives interviewed said they benefitted from having an outside student’s perspective on the project.
- 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.
- Communication within and across groups was the most important factor in the success of the project and the following factors were highlighted:
  - Communication between the organization and the team members during the project development process had an influence on whether the project was used by the organization.
  - Communication among student team members facilitated successful projects.
  - Communication within the organization about next steps led to more clear and useful project designs.
  - There was a potential for misunderstanding between an organization and the student volunteer who proposed a change within the organization. In some cases students thought they knew what was best for the organization, when in fact it was not the right time or type of project for the organization.

**Organizational Use of Projects by Client Organizations**

- All projects were useful to organizations in some manner.
- Even if organizations did not fully use the project, one or more aspects of the project were useful and beneficial.
- In a few cases the projects could not be utilized because the organization lacked the funding or capacity for the project.
- In one or two cases, the organization was not yet ready, for a variety of reasons, to use the project.
• Some Executives or Staff could not remember the details of the project, but nevertheless realized the value of the students working with their organizations.

• Strategic Planning Environmental Scans and Capital Campaign Feasibility Studies were never fully “used” in the way this study is examining use, because these projects were presented as recommendations about the feasibility of a specific campaign. The organizations decided whether or not to proceed with the campaign based on the work produced by the students.

Recommendations from Study Participants

Executives and staff provided recommendations for future students engaging in projects. These recommendations were grouped into three categories: communication, team considerations and project scope.

Communication

1) Increase formal university contact.

2) Schedule frequent meetings between students and the client organization.

3) Have students follow up with the client organization after the project is completed.

4) Have students engage with organizations in active listening and communication.

Team Considerations

1) Team composition should ideally include a staff member and an outside volunteer.

2) Team members should ideally self-disclose their individual strengths and weaknesses.

3) Team members should be prepared to be flexible because changes will occur during the project.

Project Scope

1) Maximize project time.

2) Select manageable projects.

3) Ensure that students select a topic they enjoy.

Researchers suggest that a manual be created to orient students to the project process.
This research is a step forward for the field because, until now, an in-depth study assessing the community impact of the applied learning process associated with many nonprofit-focused graduate degree programs had not been conducted. Nonprofit graduate program directors can utilize these results and recommendations when creating and or managing the experiential learning components within their programs.