

# **Learning Decision Making Through an Assignment Promoting Civic Involvement**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Civic engagement is becoming an important issue on college campuses across the country. This article describes and evaluates a group assignment used in an undergraduate course on leadership and decision making designed to increase civic engagement in management students. Qualitative and quantitative results show that students appreciation for the role of non-profit organizations increased, they became more inclined toward civic action, their vigilance in decision making improved, their likelihood of ‘buckpassing’ decreased, they increased their need for reflection, and they learned valuable lessons about working in teams. These findings are encouraging to instructors who use community-related assignments in their classrooms.

This article contributes to a growing literature on effective strategies for increasing civic engagement among management students by describing and evaluating a group assignment used in a course on leadership and decision-making. This project lasts for an entire semester and, as such, should be better positioned to change attitudes than an exercise conducted during one class period. In particular, this article seeks to assess the connections made between material learned in the classroom and the way those lessons are applied in an organizational setting. Attitudes related to civic engagement, decision making, reflection, and personal values are measured both before and after the assignment. Communication of project results will fill a gap in the management literature by quantitatively and qualitatively measuring the change in values, attitudes, and competencies of students’ (and thus future business leaders’) decision-making skills resulting from participation in the service-learning project. In testing the benefits of service learning, the changes in values development and changes in attitudes toward civic engagement have not been explicitly tested in the management context.

## EXPLORING SERVICE LEARNING IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

Service learning originated as a way to get students out of the classroom and have a forum to apply the concepts learned in class to experiences in the “real world.” Multiple authors have attempted to explain and define service learning. For example,

service-learning is an academically rigorous instructional method that incorporates meaningful community service into the curriculum. Focusing on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility, service-learning involves students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, respect for others, and commitment to the common good (DiPadova-Stocks, 2005, p. 345).

The goals of service learning include values development, civic engagement, and experiential learning (Kenworthy, 2010). From its history as community-based problem-solving intended to forge connections between knowledge and experience (Fairfield, 2010) to a way to get students out of the classroom and into the community to engage with real issues and real problems, service learning has become an important part of the curricula at many institutions of higher learning.

Service learning and civic engagement are especially relevant in the context of business education. After a wave of corporate scandals including Enron, Adelphia, and WorldCom, business schools have engaged in a reexamination of their role in educating students to be responsible corporate citizens when they engage with the ambiguity of the ‘real world.’

Students also, often for the first time, confront the ambiguity of a complex management challenge where key facts are not known a priori. They also must address the shifting requirements of project work, as facts are gathered and interim objectives evolve. Often, learning of and learning to overcome the uncertainty inherent in real-world problem-solving is a major benefit of this next-level service-learning experience (Papamarcos, 2005, p. 327).

In fact, out of these concerns, the UN Global Compact introduced the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME), an attempt to get commitments from organizations and business schools to increase the attention they pay to corporate social responsibility (Bisoux, 2008).

## STUDENT BENEFITS OF SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

Three key benefits can accrue from student participation in service learning activities. Students become more prepared to enter the working world, students develop important leadership skills, and students become increasingly engaged in their learning experiences. Students who can demonstrate, by giving examples of service learning experiences they have had in their coursework, their ability to bring together previous academic knowledge and experience help themselves to become highly sought-after employees. The experience gained through service learning projects can be directly applied to the students' careers (McCrea, 2010). The knowledge of practice that arises from these projects is distinct from knowledge of science (Brescia, Mullins, & Miller, 2009; Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Fairfield, 2010; Litzky, Godshalk, & Walton-Bongers, 2010). This type of knowledge emerges only from attempts to apply knowledge in context, to experiment, to fail, and to invent (Fairfield, 2010). In addition, through the experiential nature of these projects, students enhance their writing and speaking skills (Cooks & Scharrer, 2006) as well as conflict resolution, project management, and interpersonal skills (Litzky et al., 2010). This is an important transition from the origination of management education as a "trickle-down" product developed by researchers and taught to students. Frequently, class discussions and lectures do not provide students with enough exposure to the processes and consequences of making management-related decisions. Hands-on, action-oriented learning opportunities are required to achieve these goals (Kenworthy, 2010).

Field experiences are a critical tool in leadership development (Rhee & Honeycutt Sigler, 2010). Service learning projects in academic settings engage students with the not-for-profit sector, which helps them become more aware of activities occurring in their communities and develop a foundation for civic responsibility and an inclination toward community service (Brescia et al., 2009; Fairfield, 2010; Furco, Moely, & Reed, 2008). Commitment to service and

an increased sense of social responsibility have resulted from student experience in service learning processes, and these are also very critical leadership skills (Rhee & Honeycutt Sigler, 2010).

Finally, the incorporation of reflection into service learning has been found to increase learning outcomes for students (Conway et al., 2009; Cooks & Scharrer, 2006; Furco et al., 2008; McClam, Diambra, Burton, Fuss, & Fudge, 2008). Reflection that is both formative and summative is one way of assessing student learning and maintaining professional accountability (McClam et al., 2008) and reflection can provide a bridge between the community activities and the educational content. Giving students an opportunity to reflect on their community involvement, their awareness of issues facing the not-for-profit sector, the application of course content, and their experiences as a member of a team are each critical to fully developing learning outcomes (Rhee & Honeycutt Sigler, 2010). Students are able to try out ideas learned in class and create methods of behavior that work for them. This leads to increased academic engagement for students (Cooks & Scharrer, 2006).

## **INTRODUCTION TO**

### **THE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION RESEARCH PROJECT (CORP)**

*Decision Making and Planning* is an undergraduate elective course offered as part of the leadership sequence at a large, Midwestern public university. Most of the students are seniors majoring in Organizational Leadership. The class is largely interactive, with students preparing for and engaging in case analyses to explore the process of making decisions in a variety of organizational leadership roles. The students learn fundamental concepts related to decision-making processes, biases and heuristics, group, and ethical decision-making. A mixture of lecture, simulations, exercises, writing exercises, and cases are used to illustrate these concepts.

One transformational goal (“to transform your thinking to that of an executive decision maker”) and four learning outcomes (understanding decision making approaches and techniques, analyzing managerial decision making, enhancing critical thinking, and recognizing the responsibilities of leaders) are given in the syllabus. The semester-long Community Organization Research Project (CORP) provides an opportunity for students to satisfy course requirements, develop team skills, and apply decision-making frameworks to problems facing a community organization.

Small teams of five or six students were formed, each of which was responsible for creating a team contract and completing a number of assignments in the context of a specific community organization. The students chose the organizations from a list of non-profits that had already agreed to participate. These organizations varied in their missions, their structures, and their target populations but shared the idea of providing key services to members of the community – often those members that are financially disadvantaged. There was a large secondary research component in which students researched the organization and the environment in which that organization operates. This was followed by an exploration and analysis of two or three key decisions facing the organization. This exploration encouraged students to apply what they learned in the classroom and exposed them to some of the challenges facing a specific, local not-for-profit organization. Students had a series of deadlines for different components of the project. At several stages, a reflective self and peer evaluation was completed. Students were encouraged to be honest about their own and their groups’ learning and challenges. In addition to these reflective statements, students handed in a final project and presented their findings to the class. Client organizations also received copies of the final project.

While the project aligns with both the university's and the college's strategic goals of promoting civic engagement and social responsibility, my students are not often familiar with community organizations or volunteering their time. Unlike some institutions, the university does not require service learning as part of the undergraduate curriculum. Because participating in service enhances undergraduates' academic development, life skill development, and sense of civic responsibility (Astin & Sax, 1998), some research has been undertaken to attempt to understand the characteristics of those students most likely to volunteer. Unfortunately, information from a recent survey of college students shows that 36% of graduating seniors at baccalaureate degree-granting institutions never participate in community service during their college years (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2005). Studies show that involvement in religious activities and/or attendance at a religious university predisposes students to volunteer (Astin & Sax, 1998; Holland, 1997; Teune & Vish, 2010). An interesting negative predictor was the importance students gave to making more money as a reason for attending college (presumably an attitude possessed by many business students); less materialistic students are more likely to volunteer (Astin & Sax, 1998). Because the context of this project is a university that doesn't fit the profile of an environment that nurtures increased volunteer activities – non-traditionally aged, female, parents with college degrees, members of sororities/fraternities, living in “learning communities,” attending a private university, or attending a small university (Cruce & Moore, 2006) – the implementation of the CORP is particularly interesting.

### **Data and Methods**

In order to assess the CORP's impact on student learning, a number of different assessments were conducted. These assessments included graded reflection papers, graded project papers, peer- and self-assessments, focus groups, surveys, and a class presentation.

During the two semesters under study, the course enrolled 61 students (22 in the fall semester, 39 in the spring semester); 58 participated in the research project. While this is a relatively low sample size for traditional survey research, it is in line with many SoTL projects in the management field. The fact that there is a significant qualitative component (self and peer evaluations, focus groups, reflective papers) makes this sample size acceptable and allows for convergence of the findings.

**Pre- and Post-Surveys.** Students completed one survey during the first two weeks of class (before the project began) and another during the last week once the project was completed. Students were given class time to complete the surveys and their responses were collected by an undergraduate assistant. Surveys are not frequently used in SoTL projects in the management discipline. Instead, students are asked to provide evaluations of the course or of specific course elements, but this is neither likely to specifically measure their attitudes toward civic engagement nor to measure a change in their attitudes over the course of the semester. The pre- and post-survey design of this project allows for specific measurement of attitudes about civic engagement and for measurement in the change of those attitudes over the course of participating in the CORP. The survey items were gathered from published SoTL work in other disciplines. Because positive changes in these areas have been cited as benefits of experiential civic engagement projects, it is important to assess whether these benefits actually accrue to students. Given the key course content focused on decision making, pre- and post-measures of decision-making could also be assessed. Additional questions on the final survey specifically asked about how the CORP impacted gains in general education, decision making skills, personal and social competence, and practical competence (Bringle, Philips, & Hudson, 2004, adapted).

**Civic Action.** Civic action was measured using an 8-item scale from Moely et al (2002). Respondents were asked to respond to items using a five point Likert-type scale. Items included “I am committed to making a positive difference” and “I plan to become involved in programs to help clean up the environment.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.921 in the pre-test and 0.939 in the post-test.

**Decision Making.** Decision-making was measured using four subscales from Mann, Burnett, Radford and Ford (1997). Respondents were asked to respond to items using a five point Likert-type scale. Items from the “Vigilance” subscale included “I try to find out the disadvantages of all alternatives” and “I consider how best to carry out a decision.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.803 in the pre-test and 0.838 in the post-test. Items from the “Buckpassing” subscale included “I prefer to leave decisions to others” and “I do not like to take responsibility for making decisions.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.810 in the pre-test and 0.757 in the post-test. Items from the “Procrastination” subscale included “I waste a lot of time on trivial matters before getting to the final decision” and “Even after I have made a decision I delay acting upon it.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.657 in the pre-test and 0.793 in the post-test. Items from the “Hypervigilance” subscale included “Whenever I face a difficult decision I feel pessimistic about finding a good solution” and “I feel as if I am under tremendous time pressure when making decisions.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.745 in the pre-test and 0.666 in the post-test.

**Self-Reflection.** Self-reflection was measured using three subscales from Roberts and Stark (2008). Respondents were asked to respond to items using a five point Likert-type scale. Items from the “Engage in Reflection” subscale included “I frequently take time to reflect on my thoughts” and “I rarely spend time in self-reflection” (reverse-coded). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this



scale was 0.823 in the pre-test and 0.725 in the post-test. Items from the “Need for Reflection” subscale included “I have a definite need to understand the way my mind works” and “It is important to me to be able to understand how my thoughts arise.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.784 in the pre-test and 0.744 in the post-test. Items from the “Insight” subscale included “I usually have a very clear idea about why I have behaved in a certain way” and “Thinking about my thoughts makes me more confused” (reverse-coded). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.704 in the pre-test and 0.820 in the post-test.

**Social Values.** Social values were measured using four separate items from Mabry (1998). Respondents were asked to respond to three items using a four point Likert-type scale. Items included “Influencing social values” and “Helping others who are in difficulty.” Respondents were asked to respond to a fourth item, “Commitment to serving your community,” using a five point Likert-type scale.

**Social Desirability.** The Need for Approval Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) was administered to assess social desirability. This scale consists of 33 true-false statements to which the participants indicated whether they agreed or not. Examples of items are “I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable” or “Before voting I thoroughly investigate the qualifications of all the candidates”.

**Reflective Evaluations.** Students completed reflective evaluations at three stages: early in the semester, approximately halfway through the semester, and when the final projects were turned in. These self and peer evaluations included both numerical and narrative assessments.

**Focus Groups.** During the second half of the first semester, a group of students participated in a moderated focus group. In order to maximize student honesty, an impartial undergraduate student who had experience working with not-for-profit organizations led these

focus groups. The focus groups were guided by an “interview protocol” but participants were encouraged to speak about any elements of the CORP.

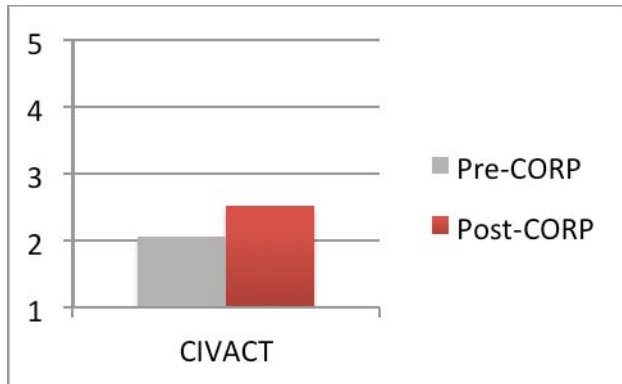
**Final Reflection Paper.** As part of the overall project, students were required to submit a reflective paper assessing the value of the CORP. Students were encouraged to think critically about the CORP and reflect on their learning (or lack thereof) and any connections between the CORP and the content of the class.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Attitudes Toward Non-Profit Organizations**

Students were very positive about the CORP experience in their reflective statements. Many students described changes in their attitudes toward non-profit organizations suggesting that participating in the CORP increased students’ appreciation for the role played by non-profits. They also appreciated the opportunity to become more engaged with the community. Student attitudes toward civic action changed significantly between the pre- and post-test. The pre-test mean for the civic action scale was 2.06 and the post-test mean was 2.53 ( $p = .006$ ). There was a positive correlation between civic action and “General Education” (from CORP) (.272,  $p=.042$ ), “Personal Social Development” (from CORP) (.297,  $p=.026$ ), and “Practical Competence” (from CORP) (.331,  $p=.013$ ). There was also a positive correlation between civic action and need for reflection (.254,  $p=.001$ ) and vigilance (.195,  $p=.008$ ).

### **Figure 1: Changes in Attitudes Towards Civic Action**



In line with changing opinions or prejudices, my opinion on non-profit organizations has changed also. I have always had an uneducated stereotype that these organizations are poorly run, poorly funded, and just overall low quality. I found that while they do struggle with funding (due to the economy), they are certainly not poorly run, nor is [the organization] low quality.

Overall this CORP project has given me a new admiration for [the organization] and what it does and stands for. It has made me reevaluate my goals in sense of wanting to be able to help and give back to my community as well

The experience of researching and analyzing [the organization] for our Community Organization Research Project challenged me to view business in a different light. This was the first time I was able to learn the ins and outs of a not-for-profit organization that has such an impact on the local community.

Working with a non-profit organization has shown me that I can combine my individual competencies with my strong leadership qualities to create and sustain a better world. I have left the course with a major change in terms of how I perceive non-profit organizations. Prior to the course, I had a less favorable perception of working for a non-profit, whereas upon completion, I have positive evoked feelings for participating in humanitarian-like efforts that will actually help assist in a change for the better.

Up to this point in my [business school] career, almost the entire focus of the curriculum has been on large corporations. We learn about the financial situations and organization of publicly traded firms, but we often times fail to even mention that there are many other types of businesses and ways in which to accomplish business goals.

Students were asked during the focus group about the elements of the CORP they least liked. Some students mentioned that they would have liked the opportunity to research profit-oriented organizations as well as (or instead of) non-profit organizations.

It would provide more benefit to the student if it wasn't (sic) just restricted to non-profit organizations. If we were able to work for companies operated for a profit, we could see different decisions that were being made on a daily basis in the business world. Non-profit organizations are more restricted to a lot more concerns and regulations than a retailer, say Walmart. There are a lot more decisions with that and a lot more things with that I feel would help to gain and learn more from that in our lives.

If it was branched out to more profit organizations which the majority of college graduates are going to work for, I just think it would give them the extra initiative to go the extra mile to get them to give their best work.

Students in the focus groups also seemed surprised about the importance of money at non-profit organizations.

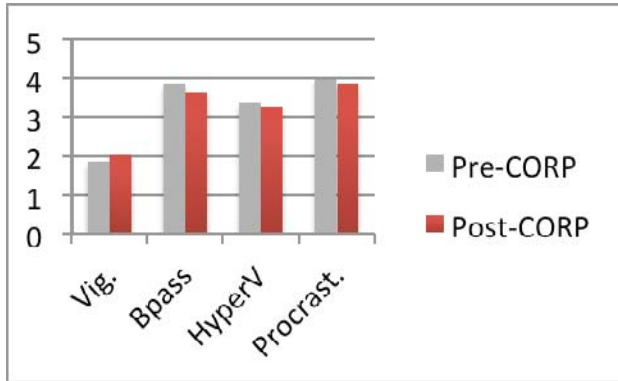
I think after working with a non-profit you take money into more consideration. You become more sympathetic for the fact they have limited resources; less to work with, yet they are trying to provide optimal services that other organizations are offering. [It is] not as easy for non-profit than [a for-] profit [organization] to do business since they have so many boundaries and they have to take so many influences into consideration within their daily routines.

Just seeing they have a strict budget that they have to adhere to was surprising. Like say, they normally know how much they're going to spend in the following year. They must tailor their salaries, overhead and operating costs; everything for that whole year by factoring how much they have raised for that whole year. So it just seems like there's a lot more little things that must be done than a regular business in order to keep a non-profit from going under. Instead of just regular decision making, it is more strategic decision making because every decision is an anticipation and expectation for the future.

### **Attitudes Towards Decision Making**

In both reflective statements and focus group comments, students reported that the CORP had a positive impact on their abilities to make decisions. Significant changes were found on the vigilance and buckpassing subscales. The pre-test mean on the vigilance scale was 1.87 and the post-test mean was 2.02 ( $p = .076$ ). The pre-test mean on the buckpassing scale was 3.85 and the post-test mean was 3.65 ( $p = .029$ ). No significant differences were found for the other two subscales.

**Figure 2: Gains in Decision Making**



If anything this CORP project has reinforced what I have learned in class when it comes to critical decision making. I had to come to a consensus with my group and then make a final decision that has the potential to effect an organization for the better or for the worst. I was forced to look at every aspect of the decisions I wanted to make and even consider the alternatives. In many ways this was a great experience in being able to actually work outside of a class or textbook with a real organization.

I now know that making a decision that will impact the entire organization is very complex and takes time before it is put into effect. Throughout the project I was able to connect many of the learning objectives in class to the real world decision making project.

The experience of the assignment and working with a team really augmented what we were discussing throughout the semester in class lectures. Though we would speak of decision making and leadership roles, there really isn't a better way to learn than to get your hands dirty in some real world experience. That's exactly what we did.

One of the underlying issues that I took away from the project is that one cannot make decisions within an organization by him or herself. You must consult others around you who also have valuable insight to add to the situation in order to make a well-educated decision or plan

This project made me realize that I should not hold back in saying what I think is right. I have changed this at my current job and my boss seems to be giving me more responsibilities.

Classes like this are hard, but after them you feel like [you] accomplished something after you are done with the class and I feel like I have learned quite a bit about decision making and consider myself better at making decisions after this class.

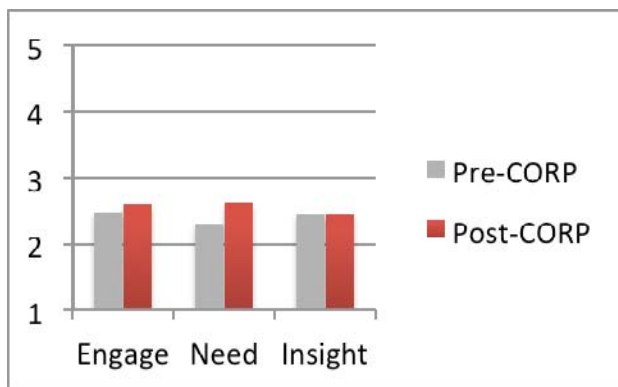
Also, I was just going to say after about halfway through the project, any time I find myself coming to a decision, I find myself appropriately analyze and utilizing techniques learned in the class and my experiences. I feel like I may be making a bad decision if I don't take into consideration the criteria or evaluations into consideration.

Most people when they make decisions were quick to make impulse decisions on everyday life occurrences. But this project really pushes planning and well thought out and prepared to handle situations on hand. It helps you to apply that to life. Let go of impulsiveness associated with making decisions and plan more and this will help you to be more of a firm believer in what you decided.

### Attitudes Towards Self-Reflection

Students did not comment on their need for, or engagement in, self-reflection in either the reflection papers or the focus group discussion. However, significant changes were found on the need for reflection subscale. The pre-test mean was 2.09 and the post-test mean was 2.42 ( $p = .032$ ). No significant differences were found for the other two subscales, although engagement in reflection did increase in a positive direction.

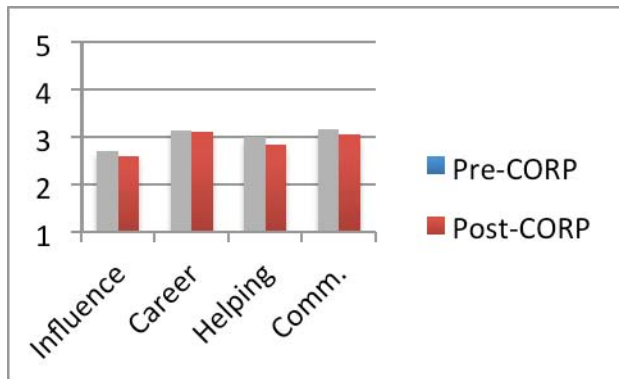
**Figure 3: Changes in Attitudes Towards Reflection**



### Attitudes Toward Personal Social Values

In their reflection papers, students talked about wanted to make changes to their future school and work plans as a result of participating in the CORP. However, no significant changes were found in any of the four measures of personal social values: influencing social values, finding a career that that provides an opportunity to be helpful to others or useful to society, helping others who are in difficulty, or commitment to serving the community.

**Figure 4: Changes in Personal Social Values**



This experience has changed me by adjusting my attitude toward non-profit groups. Now I have learned how alike for profit and non-profit companies are. I am now much more likely to consider employment with one in the future.

Because of their mission, I could see myself working in this kind of company. I almost feel like they cared more about their product (a play-place for kids) than trying to maximize the most profits.

This has altered my future in many ways, most noticeably my registration for next semester. I decided to take a class on selling to non-profit organizations because of the feeling you receive when you are able to work for a good cause rather than [your] own monetary self-benefit.

But now that I experience what it is like working with non-profit organizations, I realized that I [could] be happy in business. I want to help people who legitimately need my help, their survival or health or possessions, rely on it. Not someone who wants to use my skills to make themselves more money

In seeing the philanthropic nature of such an organization that operates largely with others' interests in the forefront of strategy, it became increasingly clear to me that business is merely the profit engine for social change. Providing services and resources to the community is a great start at curbing some of the major injustices and inequalities throughout today's world, and I have begun to see a clearer picture of who I desire to be and the problems I want to fix.

Before this project I hadn't thought of volunteering for not-for-profits much. I donate money at work and give money to stores and gas stations when they collect but I have never really thought about spending my time volunteering. Seeing the meaning behind [the organization] means a lot and I have actually looked into volunteering for the organization.

## **Learning from the CORP**



Many organizations rely on project teams for complex tasks. Such teams are highly adaptable and allow organizations to take advantage of the diverse skills and experiences possessed by their members (Pearsall, Christian, & Ellis, 2010). Teams classes in business schools within the United States have emphasized the importance of understanding the inputs (the components that go into and support a team), processes (member interactions), and outcomes (performance, satisfaction, future relationships, etc.) of teams at work (see, for examples, Hackman & Morris, 1975; Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005), and students can learn much more about each of these elements when they are an active team member. While team skills were not quantitatively measured, most students commented on the impact of working in a team.

I feel we all accomplished more as a group than each one of us separately could have even come close to. I learned a lot about trusting other people, even with something important to me, like my grade in this class.

I never use[d] to ask for help or anyone else's opinions, but this semester I had to learn to like it and overall I came to love it. From this, not only did I change as a person, but I changed my values that define me. I now value hard work that can be brought together within a group.

Working with this team really made me a better thinker and taught me how to work on a work team. I have been in several classes where group projects were assigned but I learned the most from this project. Since there was so much to do in this project and because it was worth so many points it was imperative that we worked together to do the best possible job.

I thought the best part about it was that we could offer what he has to say to a CEO of a company. Also I haven't had too many positive group experiences...but this group is great because we each bring something different to the table and I would assume that we're the strongest group in the class.

This experience has changed the way I view leaders. Leaders have a lot of responsibility when working on projects and have to learn how to work with different schedules. I also learned that leaders take on additional responsibilities such as revising, suggesting corrections, and completing tasks that group members do not want to complete.

I liked the teamwork that was involved. Our group had a lot of decisions that we had to make as a group along the way. It was good that we were able to bring [these] to the CEO and concentrate on creating positive insight to show that we are bringing something to the table and we aren't just wasting his time.

Working in a team setting especially changes your decision making whereas before you were working as an individual you would just be concerned with what you think. So it's a good thing because like we stated earlier, everyone has their strengths and weaknesses so you have everyone working together, you have everyone's decisions and criteria and it allows you to expand on the actual decisions that can be made and it helps you to expand on how the outcomes can be varied.

Survey questions were also asked on the post-survey to specifically measure changes attributed to the CORP assignment. Highest means appeared for the items "The extent the CORP contributed to using computing and information technology," "The extent the CORP contributed to understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds," "The extent the CORP contributed to understanding yourself," and "The extent the CORP contributed to learning effectively on your own."

**Table 1: Educational Gains from the CORP**

| <b>Subscale</b>                          | <b>Item</b>   | <b>Mean</b> |
|--|---|-------------|
| Gains in General Education               | The extent the CORP contributed to writing clearly and effectively.                             | 2.70        |
|  | The extent the CORP contributed to making effective decisions.                                  | 2.57        |
|  | The extent the CORP contributed to acquiring broad general education.                           | 2.80        |
|  | The extent the CORP contributed to speaking clearly and effectively.                            | 2.73        |
|  | The extent the CORP contributed to thinking critically and analytically.                        | 2.21        |
| Gains in Personal and Social Development | The extent the CORP contributed to developing a personal code of values and ethics.             | 2.89        |
|  | The extent the CORP contributed to understanding yourself.                                      | 3.11        |
|  | The extent the CORP contributed to learning effectively on your own.                            | 3.11        |
|  | The extent the CORP contributed to working effectively with others.                             | 2.04        |
|  | The extent the CORP contributed to understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. | 3.14        |

|                               |  |      |
|-------------------------------|--|------|
| Gains in Practical Competence | The extent the CORP contributed to acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills. | 2.80 |
|                               | The extent the CORP contributed to using computing and information technology.         | 3.48 |
|                               | The extent the CORP contributed to analyzing quantitative problems.                    | 2.71 |

### **Social Desirability**

The mean response for the 58 students was .453 and the scores ranged from .156 to .875. Social desirability was not positively correlated with any key variables of interest. There was a negative relationship between “Personal Social Development” (from CORP) (-.386,  $p=.020$ ) and “Practical Competence” (from CORP) (-.390,  $p=.019$ ). Not surprisingly, there were significant correlations between measures of social desirability and some personality traits. Social desirability was positively related to conscientiousness (.402,  $p=.015$ ) and agreeableness (.620,  $p=.000$ ), and negatively related to neuroticism (-.454,  $p=.005$ ). Social desirability was also positively related to procrastination (.375,  $p=.024$ ). Thus, social desirability is not likely an explanatory reason for the changes that are found between the pre- and post-surveys.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Many assignments are designed to improve student learning in a variety of areas. This study used both qualitative and quantitative data to explore changes in student attitudes as a result of participating in the Community Organization Research Project. While many students reported enjoying the opportunity to learn more about the non-profit world, some did not see the connection between the issues faced by non-profit and for-profit organizations. This may account for the lack of significant changes in the quantitative data. Some students also reported that they would make (or already had made) changes to their plans as a result of participating.

Students not only reported that their decision-making skills improved but this was supported by the quantitative data. The vigilance scale assesses how carefully people make decisions. One of the goals of the course is to provide students with tools to assess problems and make decisions. The improvement in this dimension is very important.

It was surprising that students did not complain or offer comments about the requirements for reflection. This is not often popular among college students. It is not surprising that quantitative data showed an increase in the engagement in reflection dimension. Students were asked to complete four different reflections during the semester.

Students also demonstrated learning with both qualitative comments and quantitative data. Students learned a lot about themselves, about disadvantaged members of the community, and about working in teams. Students also reported improved writing and improved communication skills.

As instructors, we often implement assignments and exercises hoping that they will contribute to the learning outcomes we design. In reflective statements, students sometimes comment on the value of these activities. However, without quantitative support, these comments could be seen as ‘sucking up’ or saying what they think the instructor wants to hear in order to boost their grade. The fact that the quantitative and qualitative data is aligned in assessing the value of the CORP is an important contribution. This quantitative component is often lacking in SoTL research. While many results were non-significant, the significance that was found with such a small sample size, shows the changes experienced by the students who participated in this assignment. Students improved in their decision making skills, became more civically engaged, learned from working in teams, and engaged more in reflection. Instructors

should gain confidence from the civic engagement projects they assign given the learning suggested by this data.

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