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Higher Education Outreach via Student Organizations: Students Leading the Way

Jennifer A. Jones and Elaine H. Giles

Abstract

Higher education outreach and engagement often occurs through student volunteering. Student organizations are one understudied and undertapped mechanism that facilitates such connections. We examined the experience of student leaders of student organizations that promoted volunteerism among their members. The mixed-methods study included a survey (n = 26) and follow-up interviews (n = 5). We found that participants' organizations were highly involved in the community and that participants gained valuable leadership skills in this role. We also found that participants had relatively little insight concerning the community partners' experience of the collaboration. We identified sampling as a unique challenge for this theoretical population and, in the discussion, provide considerations and recommendations for future scholars.

Keywords: volunteerism, service-learning, higher education, outreach, engagement

Institutions of higher education typically engage in communities through a multitude of channels. Student volunteer activities constitute an important channel for community engagement. Student volunteerism has a number of benefits for both the student and the community. Students benefit by exposure to experiences that shape their personal and professional lives (Carlisle et al., 2017; Caswell, 2018; Whitekiller & Bang, 2018). Nonprofit and governmental organizations (also known as "community partners") benefit from unpaid labor, affiliation with educational institutions, and an opportunity to recruit high-quality future staff (Edwards et al., 2001). A wide body of literature addresses student volunteerism as service-learning—for example, as part of a directed learning activity (see, e.g., Jones & Lee, 2017). However, students often also volunteer through student organizations. Very little is known about this form of student volunteering.

This article describes a mixed-methods study examining the experiences of students who coordinate student volunteerism through student organizations. We surveyed and conducted follow-up interviews with the service leaders of student organizations engaged in service at a large public university in the Southeastern United States. We found (a) participants' organizations were highly involved in the community, (b) participants gained valuable leadership skills in this role, and (c) participants had relatively little insight into the community partners' experience of the collaboration. We also identified sampling as a unique challenge for this theoretical population and, in the discussion, provide considerations and recommendations for future scholars.

Literature Review

This literature review is divided into three parts. First, we present research related to student organizations (SO) in higher education. This step includes describing the national dimensions of such SOs and identifying their role and their impact on students and the surrounding community.

Second, we present research related to student volunteerism, including both benefits and challenges. Third, we present research related to the challenges of who should be responsible for SOs' training and their service endeavors. We conclude by identifying research questions at the intersection of these bodies of literature and which were explored in this study.

Student Organizations in Higher Education

Overview

SOs are organizations formed and operated by students for an expressly stated purpose as established by their student members. The first SO was the Oxford Union, established in 1823; today, SOs are a staple on most college and university campuses (Arminio, 2015; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2015). The missions of these organizations can vary widely and can focus on areas such as academics, service, arts, politics, identity, or sports and recreation. Sororities and fraternities are also considered SOs. These organizations typically have bylaws and a charter that codify the purpose of the organization, the leadership structure, and the processes through which the general student body may become involved (either as members or through events). On most campuses, SOs are required to have a faculty advisor to provide behind-the-scenes direction and support. SOs are registered and overseen by the dean of students (or other similar body).

Role

SOs—also called campus organizations—typically fall under the purview of student affairs professionals, and they play an important role in multiple layers of the community: professional development for students as individuals, community development within the institution, and, germane to this article, informal higher education community outreach. SOs play a role in students' professional and personal development (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2015). The process of starting and/or leading an organization provides a long-term professional development opportunity, the fruits of which can be documented in a résumé and described to future employers. These benefits related to community service leadership will be described in the following section.

SOs also play an important role in community development within the institution. The structure of SOs provides a way for students to meet and befriend like-minded peers as well as peers they might otherwise not have met. Consequently, SOs also play an important role in helping students develop psychosocial and leadership identities, particularly students of minoritized backgrounds (Ferrari et al., 2010; Renn & Ozaki, 2010). These organizations can also increase both intra- and interracial friendships among students (Guiffrida, 2003; Park, 2014). Additionally, organizational membership can improve the overall campus experience of international students. International students benefit service-learning in unique ways (Kwenani & Yu, 2018), and SOs can minimize barriers to volunteering by, for example, providing group transportation and having peers help the international student address cultural and language concerns.

Finally, SOs also play an important role in higher education community outreach. This is particularly true for land-grant universities that serve to "create engaged citizens, provide social mobility, and foster students' commitment to democracy and service" (Schuh et al., 2011, p. 63). SOs frequently hold community service as a primary or secondary objective. Most campuses have a service SO whose primary purpose is community service (Jacoby, 2015). Community service in this case can include traditional volunteering activities, such as helping an animal shelter or food kitchen, as well as political and social activism, such as voter registration and promoting civil rights.

This community outreach function extends beyond the local area: Students often connect through their SOs to national and international organizations. For example, students may form a SO that supports the mission of a national charity such as March of Dimes. Some national organizations, including but not limited to fraternities and sororities, provide financial or technical support to SOs on college campuses (see, for example, American Association of University Women, n.d.; March of Dimes, n.d.) This support advances the work of the SO, and it also brings resources to the local community and builds students' professional network and interpersonal skills.

Impact

The work of SOs impacts the students, the college or university, and the local community. Students involved in SOs are generally more academically successful; however, results of such involvement vary by race and gender (Baker, 2008). The college or university benefits because SOs increase connectivity among students, promote faculty–student interaction, and provide a low-cost, high-value contribution to students' social and professional development. According to Rios-Aguilar et al. (2015), one in four university first-year students reported being involved in student-led organizations during their first year in college. Imagine that all these students involved in a SO participated in one cocurricular service experience. The local community benefits because SOs frequently promote and create opportunities for members to volunteer in the community, such as raising money for a local cause, hosting food or clothing drives for a local cause, and providing individual or group volunteers for service projects. Because these SOs exist beyond the tenure of the individual students, relationships between SOs and community partners can potentially span years or even decades. Thus, it is worth examining student volunteerism through SOs as a form of higher education outreach.

Student Volunteerism and Service-Learning

Students volunteer for a variety of reasons, including to gain professional experience, to fulfill a class requirement, to fulfill a requirement for membership in a SO such as a sorority or fraternity, and to develop a professional network (Carlisle et al., 2017; Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019). Of all these motivations, volunteering as part of a course requirement—also known as service-learning—is arguably the most closely studied. In fact, multiple academic journals and conferences are dedicated to the study of service-learning (e.g., *The Journal of Service-Learning in Higher Education*, *The International Journal for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, and *The Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*).

A smaller amount of scholarly literature addresses cocurricular service in the academy. In her book *Service-Learning Essentials*, Barbara Jacoby (2015) mentioned that institutions should offer a wide range of curricular and cocurricular service-learning experiences at different levels of frequency, duration, intensity, and level of commitment. Cocurricular service activities exist in myriad places in higher education—SOs, residential halls, living learning communities, orientation programs, first-year seminars, capstone courses, alternative break service trips, scholarship programs like the Bonner Program, Federal Work-Study, campus ministries, study abroad programs, and sororities and fraternities (Jacoby, 2015; Meisel, 2007). Among the many cocurricular service options, alternative break experiences and the Bonner Scholars program are two of the most commonly studied. In 2015, three experts on alternative break programs coauthored *Working Side by Side: Creating Alternative Breaks as Catalysts for Global Learning, Student Leadership, and Social Change* (Sumka et al., 2015). The book not only reviews best practices for constructing a successful alternative break program but also explores student learning gains. Additionally, the Bonner Foundation team have authored a number of articles and publications about the impact of the Bonner Program, its evolution, and the field of campus–community engagement (The Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation, n.d.). Although alternative break trips and the Bonner Program have been studied, scant research exists on how autonomous SOs and their leaders prepare, engage, and make meaning from their cocurricular service experience.

Student volunteerism provides a number of benefits. Volunteering experiences can provide professional development opportunities, a chance to exercise leadership, and exposure to careers and people they would have otherwise not had. All of these factors can have a positive impact on the trajectory of students' personal and professional lives (Carlisle et al., 2017; Caswell, 2018; Whitekiller & Bang, 2018). The organizations through which students volunteer—typically nonprofit and government organizations often called "community partners"—can also benefit. Examples of these benefits include access to unpaid labor, affiliation with the college or university that can lead to future opportunities, and, in some cases, an opportunity to screen and recruit future staff (Edwards et al., 2001).

This literature would be incomplete without a discussion of the numerous challenges related to service-learning. For students, mandated service experiences can be per-

ceived negatively (Henney et al., 2017) and potentially decrease student motivations (Beehr et al., 2010). Service-learning as currently practiced often reinforces a colonizer mindset and dynamic, strains town–gown relations, and may reinforce the very social ills students and faculty attempt to address (Hernandez, 2018; Smaller & O'Sullivan, 2018). Additionally, lower income students who work one or more jobs may not have time to volunteer and thus lose a résumé-building opportunity (Gage & Thapa, 2012). For community partners, challenges include lower quality work, costs associated with volunteer administration, risks related to safety and community relations, and difficulties associated with scheduling (Skulan, 2018).

Who Should Be Responsible for Preparing SOs for Cocurricular Service?

Student preparedness for service is a known challenge and issue for both curricular and cocurricular experiences. SOs sometimes do not have the guidance and support of service-learning courses, first-year seminars, or capstone projects, which provide a knowledgeable faculty or staff member and a structured set of expectations. Jacoby (2015) mentioned a lack of intentional advising and mentorship support as one of the challenges with cocurricular service experiences. Specifically, advisors of cocurricular service experiences are "walking a fine line between maintaining accountability to outcomes and partnerships on the one hand and allowing students the latitude to make and learn from mistakes on the other" (p. 124).

Although the SO leaders who coordinate the cocurricular service initiatives should oversee the training of their peers' service experiences, SO leaders may choose not to engage their peers in education and reflection. One reason is that their peers may find it too rigorous for an activity that is supposed to be cocurricular (Meisel, 2007). Unlike alternative break programs where a staff member can help facilitate the tension between the student leaders and their peers, autonomous SOs may not have that kind of support. Lacking appropriate education, training, and reflection, SO participants may not know enough about the communities they are serving with and cause unintentional harm (Meisel, 2007).

Although educational institutions require that SOs have a designated faculty or staff member advisor, the relationship between the SOs and their advisors can vary from integral to nonexistent. Kane (2017) attributes this disjointed relationship to history: Early student organizations were formed to step away from the structure and demands of the university. Student activities departments (or similar bodies) have the institutional responsibility to establish and enforce policies for SOs, but those departments usually lack sufficient staff to deeply and intentionally advise all SOs. Further, not all college faculty and staff members who might serve as advisors have a student development background to help SOs succeed, much less knowledge about cocurricular service experiences. Kane (2017) reported that many SO advisors learned how to advise through trial and error. We acknowledge that trial and error can be a great teaching tool; however, it should not be used when training students to work with community partners where the stakes are higher.

In *Service-Learning Essentials*, Jacoby (2015) mentioned that a best practice for curricular and cocurricular service-learning experiences is for the service-learning center (or similar center, such as a campus volunteer center) to provide training and guidance to other campus entities who engage in service work. However, many of these centers may be understaffed, supported by one full-time staff member and student staff (Jacoby, 2015). With a campus of 1,000 SOs, a single staff member cannot provide adequate training and support to all SOs while also managing other aspects of the center. Conversely, campus volunteer centers may have the staff but lack the bandwidth to provide extra training. Their centers' portfolio may have large initiatives and programs such as the Bonner Program and alternative break experiences that require high amounts of staff oversight. For example, the Bonner Program has cohorts of no more than five to 40 students whose participation in service is closely evaluated and assessed (The Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation, n.d.). Additionally, a hefty financial component comes with being a Bonner Scholar. Given the financial incentive, intense program evaluation, and small cohorts of students, institutions have invested significant human resources for oversight of the Bonner experiences, which may not leave them time to invest in other students' service experiences (Meisel, 2007). Similarly, alternative break programs require a huge human resource investment. According to Break Away (the

national headquarters for alternative break programs), 95% of alternative break programs reported some sort of staff involvement in the creation and execution of the alternative break program. Similarly, 61% of alternative break programs had a full-time staff member who devoted 10–40 hours or more per week to the program (Break Away, 2019). If campus volunteer center staff didn't have these large initiatives to oversee, they would have more time to dedicate to training SOs and their leaders to create quality cocurricular service experiences.

What about community partners themselves? In their study, Tryon and Madden (2019) shared that community partners are quick to point out that their staff are the best to provide training, as they have the most up-to-date knowledge. However, community partners may lack time for advanced student preparation, and the university may not have the funding to compensate their staff for this extra work (Tryon & Madden, 2019).

Thus many universities lack the capacity to provide or are not providing for all SOs the developmental learning experiences required for cocurricular service experiences. Nonetheless, thousands of college students can participate in cocurricular service on their own initiative. Without proper quality control, education, training, and reflection as part of the cocurricular service experience, some SO volunteers may cause unintentional harm through their service by being underprepared, not showing up, or reinforcing negative stereotypes.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore the experience of students who volunteer through SOs. Our research questions were as follows:

- What are common challenges faced in collaborations between student organizations and community partners?
- What are some traits of successful collaborations between student organizations and community partners?
- What is the leadership capacity of the student leaders and SOs?

Research Design and Methodology

To address the aforementioned research questions, we used a mixed-methods explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). First, we surveyed the leaders of SOs engaged in service activities at a large public university in the Southeastern United States. Then, we conducted follow-up interviews. Data from the survey and interviews were analyzed separately and then compared. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Florida.

Sampling

The theoretical population was on-campus SOs engaged in service activities. We established two for inclusion in the study: being a student who was either (a) president of a student service organization or (b) serving in a volunteer chair or community service officer position. However, this population proved difficult to sample, and, in the Discussion section of this article, we address issues and provide suggestions for future research.

We collected email addresses via the university's online directory and management system. This system categorizes the SOs (e.g., service organizations, fraternities/sororities/etc.) and lists contact information for the organizations' officers. As of December 2018, there were approximately 1,000 registered SOs on this campus. All students who met the criteria were included in the survey (n = 203).

The first round of purposive sampling was through a series of three emails sent to the university email addresses of the 203 students who fit the criteria. In response to a lower than expected response rate from the initial sampling, we advertised the study via Facebook pages these student leaders would likely follow (i.e., university-based service-learning-oriented Facebook pages) and through announcements in courses that emphasize service-learning.

We received a total of 38 responses, 26 of which were complete and usable (13% response rate). At the end of the survey students were asked if they were willing to be part of a focus group. Of the 26 respondents, five agreed to be contacted for a focus group. Because of this low number of volunteers, we transitioned from focus groups to interviews. Four of the five students responded to scheduling requests and were interviewed for this study.

The final sample included leaders represent-

ing a wide range of organizational missions, including fraternities and sororities, human service–oriented groups, and political and leadership-oriented groups. Eighty-eight percent of the participants held formal positions in their service organization, including president/executive director (54%), community service chair (15%), public relations officer (4%), or another similar function, such as event coordinator or ambassador.

Data Collection and Analysis

First, we developed and administered a 29-item survey (see Appendix A). The survey was organized in four parts related to the research questions: general processes, successful collaborations, challenging collaborations, and leadership capacity. The survey included a mix of open- and close-ended questions. Data from close-ended questions were analyzed with descriptive statistics using SPSS software. Data from open-ended questions were coded thematically using an emergent coding process (Saldaña, 2009). The survey was distributed January and February 2019.

Next, we developed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B) and conducted four follow-up interviews in March and April 2019. These interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone, were recorded, and lasted 20–30 minutes. Interviews were summarized, and the summaries were analyzed thematically (Patton, 2002) to identify insights related to the research questions.

Findings

This section is divided into five parts. In the first four, we report survey findings related to (1) general processes SOs follow in engaging with community partners, (2) highly successful collaborations, (3) challenging or unsuccessful collaborations, and (4) participants' leadership capacity and development as it relates to leading service projects. Finally, we present three insights identified through the follow-up interviews.

General Processes

Most (88.5%) of the sample considered service to be their group's primary purpose, and 11.5% considered it to be a secondary purpose. (Here and throughout, percentages often do not total 100 due to rounding.) These groups were heavily active in service, with most groups participating in service projects on a monthly (46%) or weekly (31%) basis. Fifteen percent participated in service daily, and only 8% participated on a semesterly basis. Eighty-eight percent of the organizations focused on group projects, and 12% engaged in a combination of individual and group projects.

All participants indicated they could easily find service opportunities that were a good fit, and 83% indicated there is always something for their members to do (see Table 1). Additionally, 83% reported their members engage in learning about the community partner social issues they are addressing prior to performing service. Only 50% indicated their members participated in a training by the community partners, and 58% engaged in some sort of debriefing process.

Notably, only 25% of respondents believed their members would not engage in service without the group, and 92% openly encouraged members to engage in individual, long-term service opportunities.

When asked how much time they estimated a community partner must spend in preparation for their group's service project, 42% of participants indicated less than one hour, 42% indicated between one and three hours, and 17% indicated between 3 and 5 hours.

Successful Collaborations

Participants were asked to reflect upon a particularly successful collaboration and identify what might have contributed to that success. Most of these collaborations involved one to 10 students (44%) or 11 to 20 students (56%), with fewer being 31 to 50 students (11%) or more than 50 (11%).

Participants were asked to rate the fit of the community partner for what their members wanted out of a volunteer experience. Rating was on a 0–10 scale where 10 indicated the "best fit ever." As would be expected for a successful partnership, most of the sample rated fit highly, either as a 10 (22%), 9 (11%), or 8 (33%). Eleven percent rated the fit as a 7, and, surprisingly, 22 percent rated the fit as a 4. This result suggests it is possible to have a successful collaboration even without a so-called perfect fit.

When planning for these successful collaborations, 40% of the sample began planning more than 4 weeks in advance. Thirty percent began planning 3 weeks in advance, and 30% began planning 2 weeks in advance.

Table 1. Participants' Reporting of Interaction With Community Partner

	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral/Not Applicable	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
Our organization has a strong working relationship with a staff member of our community partners.	67%	17%	17%
Our organization logs or documents members' service experiences.	75%	17%	8%
I can easily find service opportunities that are a good fit for my student organization's members.	100%	0%	0%
When I serve with a community partner, there is always something for my organization to do.	83%	17%	0%
My student organization and I engage in learning about the community partner or the social issue they address prior to doing service.	83%	8%	8%
My organization's members participate in an orientation or training given by the community partner prior to service.	50%	42%	8%
My organization members debrief the experience and apply what they have learned to other service experiences.	58%	25%	17%
My organization members typically feel well prepared prior to engaging in service.	83%	17%	0%
I believe my members would not serve on their own without the group experience.	25%	34%	42%
I would be open to encouraging my members to engage in individual long-term service opportunities as opposed to group projects.	92%	8%	0%

Note. Some percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

Challenging Collaborations

Participants were asked to reflect upon a particularly challenging or unsuccessful collaboration and identify what might have contributed to the challenges experienced. Most of these collaborations involved one to 10 students (71%), with fewer involving 11 to 20 (14%) or 21 to 30 (14%).

Participants were asked to rate the fit of the community partner for what their members wanted out of a volunteer experience. Seven participants responded to this section. The answers included a wide range of ratings on the same 0–10 scale as the successful collaboration: 10 (14%), 8 (14%), 7 (14%), 5 (29%), 4 (14%), and even 1 (14%). This result indicates it is possible to have a challenging collaborative experience even with a good fit.

When planning for this challenging collaboration, most (67%) planned more than 4 weeks in advance. Seventeen percent planned 2 weeks in advance, and 17% planned less than one week in advance.

Leadership Capacity

Prior to their current leadership role in a SO, participants had exercised or learned about leadership through an average of 2.9 different functions, including serving as a mentor

to youth (86% of respondents), serving as a leader in a different youth organization (71%), working in a teaching position (57%), taking a leadership course (43%), and working in a supervisory position (29%).

Most participants (89%) indicated that the experience of coordinating student volunteers increased their leadership capacity. Only 66% indicated they were adequately prepared for the role. See Table 2.

Insights From the Interviews

Here we list the key insights identified through the four follow-up interviews we conducted.

First, coordinating students is difficult. Participants reported that students often were slow to respond, did not check email or complete waivers, and sometimes dropped out of service commitments at the last minute. Leading in this context is confounded by two factors: There was no way to discipline or punish students for noncompliance, and sometimes the volunteers were close friends of the participant, making it even harder to hold students accountable. Participants reported they learned over time how to lead in this context and did not have these skills prior to beginning their role.

Second, students have little understanding of what goes into coordinating a service project from the nonprofits' perspective. When asked how organizations prepare, most suggested activities like getting supplies and printing waivers. In general, there was little recognition of the time and money it takes to process volunteer applications, identify and plan for a group service project, or clean up and provide recognition afterward. Additionally, participants indicated students preferred to commit to service opportunities with only a week's notice, leaving a very short planning window for the organization. Only one participant identified the town–gown disconnect, and this participant indicated they were grateful to be able to improve town–gown relations through their members' service. One student did indicate that her nonprofit management courses helped her understand the nonprofit's perspective; however, when asked, she did not describe the types of activities or protocols nonprofits would need to have in place in order to facilitate group volunteering.

Third, participants felt the experience of leading their peers in service was rewarding and personally enriching. As one said, "I learned way more than I expected." They described learning about how to lead and manage their peers, communicate with strangers, and stay organized. They also described learning about the organizations in which they provided service. Volunteering in multiple organizations was described by one participant as "an education about the world."

Discussion

This study examined student volunteerism through SOs. The research questions were as follows: (a) What are common challenges faced in collaborations between student organizations and community partners? (b) What are some traits of successful collaborations between student organizations and community partners? and (c) What is the leadership capacity of the student leaders and SOs? These questions were addressed through a mixed-methods study that included a survey (n = 26) and

Table 2. Participants' Reporting of Their Leadership Development

	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral/Not Applicable	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
I feel that the experience of coordinating student volunteers has increased my leadership capacity.	89%	11%	0%
I feel that I was adequately prepared for this leadership role.*	66%	33%	0%

**Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.*

follow-up interviews (n = 5). In this section we first discuss issues with sampling and provide suggestions for future researchers. Then, we discuss the findings and integrate them into the existing literature. Third, we identify potential best practices and offer recommendations for higher education professionals. Finally, we address limitations and conclude by explaining the significance of the study.

Difficulties in Sampling This Theoretical Population

The original sample was 203 students, yet we were able to recruit only 28 (13%) into the study. This response rate is lower than general survey response rates (Baruch & Holtom, 2008), and it probably reflects a unique sampling challenge of this population. Student leaders of SOs are likely to be time challenged. Their leadership role suggests they excel in a number of areas, and their role in coordinating students is indicative of their deep engagement. In other words, we were sampling a subgroup of students who already have heavy demands on their time. Additionally, our initial sampling was conducted through email and, anecdotally, we have found that many students seldom check their university email account. In fact, one of the interviewees for this study, a student leader who coordinates more than 4,000 hours of service each semester, said she had to get better at checking email more regularly in order to be successful in her role. Future researchers should consider these sampling challenges when studying student volunteering through SOs. We suggest offering incentives for participation and identifying strategies such as partnering with the student affairs office or even administering the survey during a student affairs training provided to student club leaders. Creativity and convenience will likely be key.

Discussion of Findings and Integration With Literature

SOs are engaged in volunteer activity that furthers their organization's mission and provides a link between campuses and the communities in which they are located. We know from service-learning literature that student volunteerism can be both beneficial to the community partner and challenging (Beehr et al., 2010; Carlisle et al., 2017; Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019; Skulan, 2018). Students have unique scheduling needs, issues with transportation, and may or may not bring the level of professionalism or expertise community partners need (Jones, Giles, & Carroll, 2019; Skulan, 2018). Some of these challenges may be mitigated when students are engaged in directed service-learning experiences, such as through a class or campus volunteer center. In these cases, the faculty or staff member may be able to provide some training or guidance to students in order to improve outcomes for both the student and the community partner. However, SOs frequently operate independently and do not have the support of a trained campus-based professional. It is likely, therefore, that community partners will find SOs more challenging to work with compared to more structured service-learning opportunities. Alternatively, because of the regularity of these groups and their perpetuation over time, SOs may provide a consistent stream of volunteers valued by community partners. Both of these scenarios are probably at play depending largely on the stability and size of the SO (i.e., larger, more stable SOs may provide a more consistent and well-prepared cadre of volunteers over the years compared to smaller SOs). Of course, at this stage these are just conjectures. More research is needed.

Learning Opportunity for Higher Education Professionals

If we categorize volunteering through SOs as a form of higher education community engagement and outreach, it is important for higher education professionals to think about how this unique activity could be improved. First, we suggest higher education professionals consider providing more support to SOs engaged in higher education outreach. The foundational step in providing that support is building more intentional relationships with these SOs.

SOs may benefit if student affairs professionals or SO faculty advisors spend more time teaching SO officers management and supervision skills. As our interviewees described, student leaders often learn through trial and error how to lead their peers and hold their SO accountable to its goals. However, when an outside entity like a community partner is involved and reliant on SOs to supply volunteers, the stakes are much higher. Our data suggest students do not appreciate the impact of not supplying enough volunteers or not holding their members accountable to their service

commitments. The wakeup call comes, as some of our interviewees described, when community partners remove the SO from their volunteer schedules for the semester. Community partners can develop a negative view of the institution's student body through a negative experience working with a SO, which can harm the town–gown relationship. Because many SOs are self-governed and SO faculty advisor involvement can vary widely, SOs often do not have structured mentorship or supervision from someone who has extensive experiences serving or working alongside community partners and can advise on how to manage their peers through these experiences.

We also encourage higher education professionals to work with their colleagues in service-learning/volunteer centers or with reputable community partners to find ways to educate SOs on the processes that enable community partners to plan and implement a service project. This training would give student leaders a better sense of the timeline they need to establish for their peers to coordinate a service project. It would also be helpful to educate SOs on the needs of the community and the number of individual service opportunities available. This information would better enable students to craft their service opportunities around the needs of the community rather than student preferences.

Additionally, student affairs professionals and their colleagues in service-learning/volunteer centers can work together to identify SOs who may not have a primary or secondary focus on service but can meet a community need. For example, they could connect a SO that has focus on STEM to the local school district for tutoring opportunities in science and math.

Finally, SOs who perform service with community partners often fly under the radar when institutions measure the quantitative and qualitative impact colleges and universities have on their surrounding communities. This data is likely currently underreported in accrediting documents such as The Carnegie Foundation's Classification for Community Engagement or those provided by the Association for Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). Better documentation systems would be helpful in capturing and capitalizing on this data.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations, the most important of which is the sample. We studied the student leaders of SOs at one large public university in the Southeastern United States. The study also collected self-reported data and thus is susceptible to voluntary response bias, nonresponse bias, and social desirability bias (Patton, 2002). Future research should consider other data collection methods (such as participant observation) to help mitigate such bias.

Finally, this study collected data about students' perceptions of their experience leading other students in their SOs to participate in volunteer service. We did not address the perspective of the community organizations. Research suggests there can be a mismatch between student interest and the needs of community organizations (Jones, Giles, & Carroll, 2019); in this study, it is possible that students' assessment of successful or challenging projects differs from the community organizations' assessment. Future research should address this missing piece.

Conclusion

This article addressed a gap in the literature: higher education engagement and outreach that occurs through informal volunteering of students through student organizations (SOs). Although we had some degree of difficulty accessing the study population, what we found should inform future studies. Specifically, we found that at least some percentage of student organizations were heavily engaged in service, coordinating these service experiences functioned as a leadership development opportunity for student leaders, and participants had relatively little insight into the experience of the volunteering activity for community partner agencies. This finding suggests that colleges and universities—particularly the student affairs offices—can play a role in educating and training student organizations to engage in best practices related to volunteering, including communicating with community partners, preparing their members to be punctual and effective volunteers, and recognizing efforts of the community partners to make the service opportunity possible. We also urge future researchers to study student volunteerism through SOs and to examine the dynamic from the perspective of the community partner.

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About the Authors

Jennifer A. Jones, Ph.D. *is an assistant professor of nonprofit leadership and management at the University of Florida.*

Elaine Giles *is an extension agent in 4-H youth development with the University of Florida Institute of Food Agricultural Sciences Extension.*

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Appendix A: Survey

1. What is your student organization's name?
2. What is your position within your organization?

General Processes

3. Would you consider service a primary or secondary focus of your student organization?
   a. Primary
   b. Secondary
4. How frequently does your student organization participate in service activities?
   a. Daily
   b. Weekly
   c. Monthly
   d. Semesterly
   e. A few times a year
5. A community partner is an organization with which you serve. This can be a nonprofit organization or a government agency, including a public school. Approximately how many community partners does your organization serve with during the academic year?
6. Briefly describe the process your organization goes through prior to organizing a service activity. What specific steps do you take between the time you decide to offer a service opportunity and when the opportunity is complete?
7. List the names of the community partners your organization has served with this past academic year.
8. Most of your organization's volunteer service projects are:
   a. Individual student projects
   b. Group projects
   c. A combination of individual and group projects
9. Please select the option that represents your organization's experience working with community partners: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Not Applicable
   a. Our organization has a strong working relationship with a staff member of our community partners.
   b. Our organization logs or documents members' service experiences.
   c. I can easily find service opportunities that are a good fit for my student organization's members.
   d. When I serve with a community partner, there is always something for my organization to do.
   e. My student organization and I engage in learning about the community partner or the social issue they address prior to doing service.
   f. My organization's members participate in an orientation or training given by the community partner prior to service.
   g. My organization members debrief the experience and apply what they have learned to other service experiences.
   h. My organization members typically feel well prepared prior to engaging in service.
   i. I believe my members would not serve on their own without the group experience.
   j. I would be open to encouraging my members to engage in individual long-term service opportunities as opposed to group projects.

10. How much preparation time do you think a community partner has to do in order to be ready for your group?
    a. < 1 hour
    b. 1–3 hours
    c. 3–5 hours
    d. 5 hours or more

Successful Collaborations

11. Take a moment to reflect on a successful collaboration between your student organization and a community partner. Please describe the collaboration and explain why you consider it successful. Now, answer the following questions while thinking about that collaboration.
12. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being "best fit ever," how would you rate the fit between what the community partner needed and what your members wanted out of a volunteer experience?
13. What preparation did you or your group engage in prior to this collaboration?
14. How did that community partner prepare to work with you and your group?
15. What might have made the experience even better?
16. How far in advance did your student organization begin planning to volunteer with that community partner?
    a. Less than one week in advance
    b. One week in advance
    c. Two weeks in advance
    d. Three weeks in advance
    e. Four weeks in advance
    f. More than four weeks in advance
17. How many students participated in that collaboration?
    a. 1–10
    b. 11–20
    c. 21–30
    d. 31–50
    e. 51+

Challenging Collaborations

18. Take a moment to reflect on a frustrating collaboration between your student organization and a community partner. Please describe the collaboration and explain what was frustrating. Now, answer the following questions while thinking about that collaboration.
19. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being "best fit ever," how would you rate the fit between what the community partner needed and what your members wanted out of a volunteer experience?
20. What preparation did you or your group engage in prior to this collaboration?
21. How did that community partner prepare to work with you and your group?
22. What might have made the experience better?
23. How far in advance did your student organization begin planning to volunteer with that community partner?
    a. Less than one week in advance
    b. Once week in advance
    c. Two weeks in advance

d. Three weeks in advance
e. Four weeks in advance
f. More than four weeks in advance

24. How many students participated in that collaboration?
    a. 1–10
    b. 11–20
    c. 21–30
    d. 31–50
    e. 51

Leadership Capacity

25. I feel that the experience of coordinating student volunteers has increased my leadership capacity.
    a. Strongly agree
    b. Agree
    c. Neutral
    d. Disagree
    e. Strongly disagree
26. I feel that I was adequately prepared for this leadership role.
    a. Strongly agree
    b. Agree
    c. Neutral
    d. Disagree
    e. Strongly disagree
27. Is there any advice you would like to give other potential student leaders?
28. Please check any of the following activities you participated in before taking this leadership role:
    a. Taken a leadership course
    b. Served as a leader in another student organization
    c. Worked in a supervisory position
    d. Worked in a teaching position
    e. Served as a mentor to youth
    f. Other (If you selected "Other," please explain:)
29. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group? If so, please provide your contact information via this survey:

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What social issues interest your organization's members?
2. When seeking volunteer opportunities within the community, do you prioritize mission compatibility or which organization can accommodate the most students?
3. When it comes to serving with community partners, what is one thing you wish they knew?
4. Describe a memorable service experience that your organization had with a community partner.
5. Describe a frustrating service experience that your organization had with a community partner.
6. What are some factors that make you feel equipped to coordinate your peers in service experiences?
7. What are areas you would like additional skills in when working with your peers and/or community partners?
8. How do organizations prepare students for service?
9. From the nonprofit's perspective, what does preparation for your group look like?
10. Think about the most successful collaboration your organization has done. What were some characteristics of that collaboration?
11. When it comes to managing your peers in service experiences, what do you enjoy?
12. When it comes to managing your peers in service experiences, what frustrates you?
13. Is there anything you want us to know about your organization's service experiences?