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Impact or Impasse: How to Measure University Student Effect on Community Organizations

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Abstract

This applied research project examines the impact that student engagement has on the goals of a university's community partners. A pilot study conducted in 2019 draws upon questionnaire and interview data gathered from administrators of seven community organizations that are longtime partners with Illinois State University. Key findings that emerge from descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of the data suggest that the positive impact students have on community organizations far outweighs any challenges the organizations may experience. The project concludes with recommendations on how to enhance the research tool for future evaluations and how to further improve the beneficial impacts that university students have on community partner organizations.

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I. Introduction and Background

Organizations must constantly evaluate whether their actions are useful so that they can improve their programs and prove their value to stakeholders, while program evaluation is also necessary for an initiative to remain relevant and beneficial. Illinois State University (ISU) has a long history with the local community. Founded in 1857, ISU began as a normal (teaching) university ("Illinois State University," n.d.). Since its founding, ISU has been an integral part of the community, to the point where the town of Normal was named after the university. Yet, it was not until 2014 that ISU opened the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CESL), an institute specifically designed to encourage and measure university-community interaction ("About," 2019). The following project provides an evaluation tool for ISU to measure the impact of its students on the community. The tool will enable the university to accurately share current student impact, as well as provide a template for how other universities may measure the impact of their own student-to-community engagement.

Background

Illinois State University's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CESL) works to create, coordinate, and expand programming that helps ISU students interact with, learn from, and support the community ("Purpose," 2019). The Center is primarily known for its work with service learning initiatives, alternative break trips, and student projects in the community.

CESL works with many community partners. For the purpose of this study, "community" is defined as the metropolitan area of Bloomington-Normal, IL, while a "partner" is an organization that works with ISU in a professional capacity. Examples of partnerships include an

organization having a representative speak to a class, students from a class being assigned volunteer hours, or a community organization having a registered student organization like the university's Habitat for Humanity chapter. Partnerships can vary widely in their size, focus, duration, formality, and complexity (Beere, Votruba, & Wells, 2011, p.191).

In 2018, CESL published its *Community Partner Survey Report*. The *Community Partner Survey* involved dozens of local community organizations that partner in some form with ISU. The survey collected information about the organizations and evaluated the state of their relationship with ISU. For example, questions assessed what CESL could do to improve the partnering experience for community organizations, whether there was clear communication between ISU and the organization, and if there was interest for CESL to provide professional development opportunities. While the *Community Partner Survey* is an excellent measure of partner satisfaction, it does not assess how the long-term outcomes of organizations are affected by student involvement.

The effect of the partnerships and the satisfaction of the partnerships are two sides of the same coin. While it is crucial to evaluate the relationship between ISU and community partner organizations, it is also critical to evaluate the impact of student engagement on those organizations. Student engagement is any activity where university students are involved with the greater community through scholarship or service (e.g. internships, volunteering, research).

Are ISU students increasing the capacity of organizations, helping organizations secure funding, bringing new energy to the organization, or helping organizations make the community a better place to live? Are organizations better able to meet their goals and

objectives via the involvement of students from Illinois State University? If students are making a difference, then how? These questions must be asked to effectively evaluate student impact.

In Spring 2019 staff at CESL worked with the author to develop a tool to assess student impact. Paired with the *Community Partner Survey*, this new tool will help paint a fuller picture of ISU-community partnerships. Both the satisfaction of the relationships and the impact of the relationships will be assessed by using both tools. After several meetings between CESL and the author, the following research question was finalized: *What measurable impact does student engagement have on community organizations partnering with Illinois State University?*

Few studies have attempted to answer this question from the perspective of community partner organizations or on a long-term basis. Thus, while not generalizable, the present study will nevertheless serve as a practical example for universities developing a tool to evaluate impact. In addition to answering the research question, CESL requested that the instrument be designed simple enough for undergraduate students to administer it in the future, and for the study to not be overly inconvenient for the participating community organizations.

The following capstone paper begins with a brief description of the applied research approach used in this study. An extensive literature review on overall university-community partnerships follows, succeeded by a narrower focus on student engagement. A detailed explanation of the research design and methodology is followed by the study's results and discussion, recommendations, and conclusion. The questionnaire portion and the interview questions of the research instrument are attached as Appendices 1 and 2.

II. Literature Review

History of University-Community Engagement

While the relationship between universities and their host communities has a long history, this paper highlights the most recent wave of university-community engagement. Beginning in the 1980s, a renewed sense of purpose arose amongst American universities to reach into their community, bolstered by criticism of the isolated, ivory tower of academia. An exemplar of this attitude was the president of Harvard University in 1982, Derek Bok. Bok argued that an engaged university should help address basic social problems instead of being insular (Bok, 1982). A decade later, in 1994, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* was founded, providing a place for academics to publish research on university-community engagement ("Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning," n.d.). By 1996, the Carnegie Foundation was in full support of university-community engagement. The president of the foundation criticized the tendency of universities to withdraw from the larger society and maintained that the chief purpose of a university should be to build a more just society (Boyer, 1996).

The increase of attention on university-community engagement in scholarship led to a surge in practical, community-based projects. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development reported that 342 colleges offered nearly 600 university-community initiatives in 1999, which was more than twice the amount of reported initiatives in 1995 (Fisher, Fabricant, and Simmons, 2004, p.15). Additionally, from 1995-1997, almost 500 universities received grants from the Corporation for National Service's Learn and Serve Higher Education program. The grants allowed 3,000 new service learning courses to start (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

To encourage the creation of community engagement centers and programs, the presidents of Brown, Georgetown, and Stanford Universities formed The Compact in 1985, which evolved into the organization Campus Compact. Campus Compact played a pivotal role in the 1990s and early 2000s in the advancement of service learning and university-community partnerships through their various publications, campaigns, and local chapters ("History," 2019). Campus Compact's goal is to advance "the public purpose of over 1,000 colleges and universities by deepening their ability to improve community life and to educate students for civic and social responsibility" ("Home," 2019). Many of the resources cited throughout this capstone project were recommended by Campus Compact or found via their toolkits, emphasizing the importance the organization still has in the field of university-community engagement.

In line with the gradual but fundamental shift of modern universities towards community engagement, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, with the support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, created a multi-year national commission in the late 1990s. The Kellogg Commission released several reports between 1996 and 2000, with one specifically focused on the "engaged institution," ("Returning to Our Roots," 2001, preface). The Kellogg Commission listed seven characteristics that an "engaged" academic institution should have: responsiveness, respect for partners, academic neutrality, accessibility, integration, coordination, and resource partnerships ("Returning to Our Roots," 2001, p.16). This "test of engagement" assesses whether a university is truly engaged in a community, or simply housed on local property. Since its release, many universities have used the Kellogg Commission's report as a benchmark for their activities.

Interest in university-community engagement continued to increase in the 2000s. In addition to the creation of engagement centers on university campuses, scholars continue to research and write about the effectiveness, best practices, and benefits of university-community engagement (Eddy, 2010; Hoy & Johnson, 2013; Pompa, 2002; Stanton, 2012). Other scholars point to the contemporary norm that today's universities are expected to work towards the improvement of the health and well-being of the community in which the university is located (Bacow, Kassim-Lakha, & Gill, 2011; Dubb, McKinley, & Howard, 2013; Dworkin & Curley, 2011; Holland, 2005; Weerts &Sandmann, 2010).

There is no sign of university-community engagement slowing down. To recognize the official efforts of universities to engage with their communities, the Carnegie Foundation, in partnership with Campus Compact, created a new classification system used to distinguish the community engagement efforts of exemplary institutions (Driscoll, 2009). New departments and engagement centers continue to be created ("About," 2019), and scholars keep making the case that the purpose of universities is to serve the public by being present and strengthening the community (Mitchell, 2016).

Benefits of University-Community Engagement

The reported benefits of community engagement are numerous and have been reported in great detail elsewhere. However, the current discussion would be remiss if it were not to include a summation of some key findings. While some studies analyze the complex and multi-tiered relationship between universities and community partners, most studies choose to focus on a single aspect of the relationship: the benefits for students, the benefits for the institution, or the benefits for the community organization.

When considering university students, community engagement enhances student learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Mitchell, 2008; Wagner & Mathison, 2015), encourages student leadership (Dugan et al., 2013), and increases cultural awareness and appreciation of diversity (Finley, 2012). The effect of having students work on real-world problems cannot be overrated (McGowan et al., 2013). The Carnegie Foundation recognizes such importance as it cites university-community partnerships as enhancing scholarship, curriculum, teaching and research (Williamson et al., 2016, p.2).

From the university's perspective, Coetzee & Nell (2018) write that community-based projects and service learning "represent some of the most powerful and viable avenues for at least some universities to achieve impact in their communities" (p.788). Additionally, community engagement can open doors for research, improve a university's reputation in the community, and increase faculty publications (Jentleson, 2011, p.41). For the community partners, community engagement initiatives offer benefits such as capacity building for research and evaluation, validation of existing efforts, program enhancements, improved service delivery, and positive social change (Dugery & Knowles, 2003; Wagner & Mathison, 2015).

Other studies highlight the relationship between the university and community organizations, or focus on mutually beneficial outcomes, such as enriching educational opportunities, conducting practical and useful research that solves real-world problems, enhancing capacity, and helping community organizations achieve their goals (Bacow, Kassim-Lakha, & Gill, 2011; Dubb, McKinley, & Howard, 2013; Dworkin & Curley, 2011; Holton et al., 2015; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

Challenges of University-Community Engagement

While there are many examples of mutually beneficial partnerships between universities and community organizations, it would be wrong to assume such partnerships are inherently a win-win for both parties. One challenge present in all university-community engagement is the underlying power dynamic that exists in the relationship. Often, university-community partnerships are an "us (university) helping them (community)" scenario that can be paternalistic, creating an unhealthy dependency or unintended harm (Jones & Palmerton, 2010; Chupp & Joseph, 2010). The imbalance of power can damage relationships, impede trust or create an unhealthy relationship where an organization cannot function without the constant support (i.e. volunteers or research) of the university (Allen, 2003; Haski-Leventhal, Meijs, & Hustinx, 2010; Liu & Ko, 2011; Poncelet, 2003; Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007). Hoy and Johnson (2013) write that "Only when partnerships are self-conscious about this power dynamic can the questions about deeper student *and* community impact be adequately considered" (p.10).

There are further potential disadvantages and opportunity costs that accompany a partnership, such as increased work for the organization or increased expenses needed to accommodate the volunteers (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010; Poncelet, 2003; Roza et al., 2013; Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007). Additional challenges of university-community partnerships include the unintentional reinforcement of stereotypes (Cipolle, 2004; Hess, Laning, & Vaughan, 2007) and tensions between volunteers and paid staff that increase worker turnover if not handled properly (Bittschi et al., 2017).

While projects may have the best of intentions, they can still place an unintended burden on the community partner organization, and organizations have complained about the

increased workload in previous research (Wager & Mathison, 2015, p.90). One community organization responded in an interview that "They [the university] don't realize how much work it is to have all these volunteers...the university puts the organization in a difficult spot sometimes" (McReynolds, 2014, p.6). Yet, despite the challenges, an organization is unlikely to openly complain about the university due to the power dynamics previously mentioned.

The Need for Evaluation

As evidenced in the earlier discussion of benefits and challenges of university-community partnerships, there remains a surprising lack of scholarship on the impact of student engagement on community organizations, particularly from the perspective of the partnered community organizations (King et al., 2010, p.60).

Studies focused on the concerns of the university suggest best practices from the perspective of the institution (Holton et al., 2015), while other studies evaluate how students are affected by their community service (Coetzee & Nell, 2018; Dugan et al., 2013). Several studies discuss the need for collaboration between universities and their community partners (Huxham, 1996; Lee & Bozeman, 2005). Other studies may emphasize the perspective of the community partner, but the focus is still often on the relationship between the partner and the university rather than actual impact (King et al., 2010; McReynolds, 2014). Few studies specifically measure student impact on the community.

When researchers and practitioners turn their attention to impact, they find it a challenging measure to capture, and often default to measuring quantity over quality, whether intentionally or not. As Holland writes, "The work of service-learning is complex and multidimensional; it depends on a community-university collaboration in which all parties

identify shared goals but also have distinct perspectives. Yet all too often, assessment of service-learning courses is limited to documenting hours of service or collecting journals; worse, it does not happen at all" (Holland, 2001, p.52). To properly evaluate the impact of student engagement, the long-term outcomes must be measured in addition to the short-term outcomes (Minkler, Blackwell, Thompson, & Tamir, 2003; Sanchez, Carrillo, & Wallerstein, 2011).

If a program does focus on the quality of the engagement, the university may still run into the challenge of clearly articulating potential benefits of the partnership (Cruz & Giles, 2000) or realize that very little research has been done on community outcomes of student engagement and thus no consensus exists about best practices (Erickson, 2010). The few studies that address community impact of student engagement are often case studies and may not be applicable to other scenarios. Holton et al. (2015) write that

> ...existing literature about assessing the impact of community partnerships typically focuses on one specific partnership rather than the aggregate effects of diverse partnerships involving an institution, reflecting the challenges of assessing large-scale and collective impact through diverse partnerships across complex institutions and communities. (p.103)

The current research project intends to rectify these concerns for ISU's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning.

In addition to contributing to the literature, this study stresses the importance of consistently evaluating programs and operations. As Steve Patty writes in his book *Getting to What Matters: How to Design and Develop Evaluation*, evaluation can "help us see better, think better, focus better, and grow our leaders and our organizations better" (Patty, 2013, p.7). Although proper evaluation practices may require extra time and effort, it is worthwhile to

create a culture of positive evaluation where programs are continuously growing and improving (Jentleson, 2011, p.74). In their list of high-impact community engagement practices, Hoy and Johnson (2013) include the need to measure impact, supported by qualitative and quantitative evidence (p.275). The Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning wants to know if the work ISU students do matters, and how their impact may alter the Center's future programs.

Evaluation is not only pivotal for improving programs and organizations, but it is also necessary for proving the program's value to stakeholders, a must in today's competitive funding field. After all, university-community partnerships and engagement programs "depend on effective assessment strategies to generate the evidence that will sustain internal and external support and document impacts" (Holland, 2001, p.53). The current study will thus provide useful insight into an area of student engagement research that is currently lacking while also providing a practical tool for ISU's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning for use in both proving and improving their student engagement impacts.

III. Research Design & Methodology

Applied Research Approach

Applied and basic research are two approaches that are fundamentally different. According to Baimyrzaeva (2018), the purpose of basic research is to "advance human understanding and knowledge of the universe" (p.9). Most studies discussed in a university setting are basic research in that they are trying to make observations that can be generalized – applied to other contexts and situations. In contrast, the purpose of applied research is to "help a client make a decision about a particular situation, problem or opportunity" (Baimyrzaeva, 2018, p.9).

While basic research can often be conducted in a controlled environment (e.g. laboratory), applied research, by definition, occurs in the context of the client, in the "real world." An applied research study may be better served by using a multitude of different data collection and analysis methods versus basic research which often has a narrower research methodology (Bickman & Rog, 2009). Finally, the two research strategies are different in their final output. Basic research is presented at scientific conferences and published in academic journals, while applied research is usually concluded by a presentation and report given to the client. In the context of this capstone project, an applied research approach is taken. The Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning is viewed as the client, with the author creating a tool to help it answer whether student engagement makes a difference in the goals and objectives of community organizations.

Throughout the research design, the elements of applied research have been considered. According to the *Beginners' Guide for Applied Research Process*, the criteria for

applied research design are validity, reliability, effectiveness, efficiency, feasibility, relevance, and sufficiency (Baimyrzaeva, 2018). As will be detailed later, the research instrument is believed to be valid and reliable due to its cross-checking between the questionnaire and interview portion of the study, as well as comparing results with those obtained from CESL's *Community Partner Survey* (2018).

The effectiveness of the design is evident in the instrument's ability to answer the research question. Since the questionnaire and interview questions were based on past studies that successfully measured impacts of university-community partnerships, there was reason to believe the designed instrument would likewise effectively measure impact. As will be detailed in the Findings section, the instrument was proven effective when it was able to answer the research question: *What measurable impact does student engagement have on community organizations partnering with Illinois State University?*

Efficiency of the instrument, another vital component of applied research, is clear. The online questionnaire portion of the instrument was designed to take five to ten minutes to complete, while the interviews were designed to be conducted either in person or by telephone and to take no more than thirty minutes. During this pilot study all interviews occurred over the phone. The research instrument was intentionally designed to obtain the most information from the respondent in as little time as possible. If the study is not a burden for the organizations to participate, then they will be more likely to participate in future evaluations.

The instrument was kept purposefully simple to increase feasibility. The intent was to design an instrument that could be used by a variety of students with different amounts of experience. Jentleson (2011) writes that undergraduate participation in the evaluation process

can provide a “useful and unique lens on program development” (p.89). In the future, undergraduate students with no research experience can still assist the Center in conducting the research by administering the questionnaire and interviewing an organization’s representative.

The final element that must be met for applied research design is sufficiency. Sufficiency is concerned with whether the information collected by the instrument is enough to accurately answer what measurable impact student engagement has on community organizations partnering with ISU. Based on the validity, reliability, effectiveness, efficiency, feasibility, and relevance of the research instrument, as well as the example set by past studies, enough data was collected to satisfactorily answer the research question for the Center.

Student Engagement Defined

Thus far, the paper has covered a broad swath of literature regarding university-community partnerships. Such partnerships can be generalized but include specific scenarios that do not apply to student engagement, such as faculty volunteers or scholarships provided by area companies. Since the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning is primarily focused on the impact of students in the community, we must provide a narrower definition of engagement. Student engagement is defined as *any activity where university students are involved with the greater community through scholarship or service*. While narrower in that it only considers activities conducted by students, this definition is nevertheless purposely broad to include such activities as community-based participatory research, service learning, community outreach, internships, and volunteer activities (Beere, Votruba, & Wells, 2011, p.17). Definitions of these specific types of student engagement follow.

Community-based participatory research is research conducted by students that involves “community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process” (Israel et al., 2001, p.182). In this context, this type of research will typically involve professors overseeing a project where they use students to collect data. Community Outreach, or public engagement as it is also known, works by either taking students and their resources to “off-campus locations or by bringing the public or subsets of the public onto the campus” (Northern Kentucky University, 2006, p.11). An example is a group of students organizing a community panel for an event or performing a play for the local after-school program.

In his seminal work on service learning, Furco (1996) defines volunteerism as “the engagement of students in activities where the primary emphasis is on the service being provided and the primary intended beneficiary is clearly the service recipient” (p.4). Furco defines internships as “programs [that] engage students in service activities primarily for the purpose of providing students with hands-on experiences that enhance their learning or understanding of issues relevant to a particular area of study” (Furco, 1996, p.4). In contrast, Furco suggests that service learning is intended to equally benefit both provider and recipient “as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring” (p.5).

While there is a debate about which type of engagement is most beneficial, the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning is more interested in whether student engagement has any impact rather than what type of student engagement is most impactful. Still, the research instrument collects data on the type of engagement students participate in

with an organization. Although not used in the current project, data on the specific type of student engagement may prove useful in the future as CESL considers how to best meet its goals.

Measuring Impact

Measuring the impact of student engagement is a challenging endeavor. Partners may not be at a point where they can engage in the research of such complex relationships (Hicks et al., 2012) or the university may be unsure whether quantitative (King et al., 2003) or qualitative (Erickson, 2010) methods will best capture the information. There is no consensus on the best way to measure community impact within the literature regarding university-community partnerships (Canter, 2012). Thus, a wide array of past research methods must be considered.

One of the most common ways to measure the impact of student engagement is to examine the economic impact of volunteers. In this method, researchers count volunteer hours and calculate the economic value of the volunteers (Handy & Srinivasan, 2004; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2004; Vitner, Shalom, & Yodfat, 2005). Many universities use an economic perspective to assess the impact of their students' engagement with the community, citing the value of volunteers as an in-kind contribution to community organizations (Ohme, 2004; Parsons & Griffiths, 2003; Seifer et al., 2003; Steinacker, 2005, University of Birmingham, 2013). But solely focusing on an economic measure of impact ignores other advantages of impact, such as students "being goodwill ambassadors for the organization, enhancing the organization's reputation, and advancing its mission" (Handy & Brudney, 2007, p.139). Other researchers agree that using an economic measure of impact is not a useful long-term measure

of how students are positively affecting the community (Coetzee & Nell, 2018; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2011).

An alternative to economic measures is the CIROP (community impacts of research-oriented partnerships) measure, developed by King et al. (2003). The CIROP measure is a 33-item tool to measure the impact of university-community partnerships from the perspective of community members. The CIROP instrument is a quantitative resource that is useful for collecting data on how organizations feel about the effectiveness of a partnership. The CIROP tool uses a Likert scale to ask questions such as "Over the past year, to what extent has your experience with the partnership provided you with an opportunity for professional or personal development?" and "Over the past year, to what extent has the partnership enhanced your community's ability to utilize outside knowledge more effectively?" (p.2-4). The CIROP measure is useful and was consulted when designing the current project's research instrument. However, the CIROP is focused primarily on research-oriented partnerships, as opposed to overall student engagement, and emphasizes the relationship of the partnership more than long-term community impacts.

Another excellent example of evaluation design was created by Srinivas, Meenan, Drogin, and DePrince (2015). Together, they created the Community Impact Scale (CIS), which measures "benefits and costs of community-university partnerships across a range of outcomes as perceived by community partners" (2015, p.5). The CIS directly addresses many of the concerns when it comes to evaluating the impact of community-university partnerships. However, as useful as the CIS is, it could not answer the research question for the current study since it is concerned with the overall partnership and not specifically the impact of students.

The CIS asks what difference a partnership makes, while the current study needed to learn what difference ISU students make.

Although the CIROP measure and the CIS are both useful quantitative tools, they focus primarily on measurable outputs. As Canter (2012) highlights, outputs do not necessarily equate with impact. Impact can only be determined where actual, long-term change has occurred. Such research lends itself to qualitative methods since true impact can be difficult to measure in numbers. Sometimes it takes a personal perspective on an organization's activities over several years to assess whether any impact has occurred. Qualitative measures can get beyond the "what" questions of quantitative inquiry and into the "how" and "why" of experience. As Patty writes, "Seeing qualities of human experience and human change is what qualitative evaluation is all about" (2013, p.40).

Mixed Methods

With such considerations in mind, the current study employs a mixed methods approach, combining aspects of both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The study involves organizations that have had a relationship with ISU for five or more years and consists of two sections. The first part of the study is an online questionnaire and the second part is a short interview. There are three primary reasons for taking this mixed-methods approach.

The first reason is that a mixed methods approach increases the validity of the research results. By including questions on the current study that were also included in the Center for Community Engagement & Service Learning's *Community Partner Survey* (2018), we can check external validity (e.g. are organizations responding to the two instruments in similar ways). Furthermore, having questions in the questionnaire that are then repeated and delved into

deeper during the interview increases internal validity. This cross-check allows the researcher to ensure that a respondent's answers are consistent between the two sections of the study, and if not, investigate why that may be so.

The second reason for a two-part, mixed methods approach is increased flexibility and simplicity. One of the primary concerns of CESL is that the instrument is practical for the Center to use in the future. Holland (2001) points out that most instruments designed for assessing university-community partnerships are so complicated or burdensome that they are not used again after the initial research. With this in mind, the instrument must be simple enough for undergraduate interns and researchers to conduct future research using this tool. Additionally, the two-part design allows the possibility that only one part will be used if necessary. For example, there may be a time when CESL is not able to conduct the interviews, but they could still use the questionnaire portion of the instrument to collect useful data.

The third justification for a mixed methods approach is the precedent set by past studies. As previously discussed, past studies have used both solely quantitative (El Ansari, 1999) or qualitative (Hahn, Brown, & Peters, 2015) methods. However, there is reason to use both simultaneously. Driscoll et al. (1998) break down the advantages and disadvantages of assessing partnerships with surveys, interviews, focus groups, and other tools. Holland (2001) uses the writings of Driscoll et al. to further support that "the best designs seek a balance" between the different methods (p.57). Shinnamon et al. (1999) developed a substantial research tool for Community-Campus Partnerships in Health that combines individual surveys with qualitative focus groups. These past studies support the use of both a questionnaire and interview within a single study.

The design of the research instrument is based on several past studies. El Ansari's *Stakeholders Questionnaire – Community Partnerships* (1999) strongly influenced the questionnaire portion of the research instrument. The questionnaire is also based on Shinnamon et al.'s 1999 assessment tool. The interview questions are mostly original but inspired by the questions and methodology of several past studies (Erickson, 2010; Hahn, Brown, & Peters, 2015; McReynolds, 2014). The two portions of the research instrument are included as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

Choosing the Participants

Looking at past research, the length of a relationship between a university and a community organization is repeatedly cited as a key factor in the success of that partnership. Trust, a necessity in impactful student engagement, must develop over time (Lucero, 2013; Lucero & Wallerstein, 2013). Wagner and Mathison (2015) claim that for student engagement to succeed, sustained partnerships (long-term) are needed rather than one-time projects (p.91). They further emphasize that strong, impactful programs "build over time…a sustained partnership, with a history and intended future, is better than one-day service projects…" (Wagner & Mathison, 2015, p.92). Mitchell (2008) and Chupp and Joseph (2010) concur that the development of authentic partnerships requires a long-term, multiyear commitment.

Another aspect of time to consider is the turnover of staff. Leaders and volunteer coordinators, as well as volunteers, may change dramatically from year to year. To address this concern, Hackett and Donohue (2013) suggest having an ongoing dialogue between the organization and the university. They write that "part of that dialogue acknowledges that some members…will come and go" (p.114). Long-term partnerships build trust and improve impact,

but they are also a sign that the partnership has continued despite staff turnover on either side of the partnership.

Representatives of twenty-seven community organizations responded to CESL's *Community Partner Survey* in 2018. Among the respondents, the length of the relationship with ISU ranged from new/one year to 24 years, with the median relationship being five years. Based on the previously mentioned studies citing the importance of time in a relationship, the participants were selected from the organizations that responded at or above the median length of five years. The entire population that met these criteria were contacted, providing the study with nine organizations to include in the current pilot.

When available, the organization administrators that originally participated in the *Community Partner Survey* were contacted. Otherwise, a representative from an organization was identified by CESL staff if they oversaw ISU student interaction with that organization. The representatives were initially contacted by an IRB-approved staff member at the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning to establish buy-in from the participants. After the initial contact, the author administered the questionnaire and interview. To avoid a potential conflict of interest, one of the participating organizations was interviewed by the CESL staff member since the author was previously involved with the organization in a student-engagement capacity. Seven organizations were represented in the online questionnaire (78% response), and all seven organizations involved with the questionnaire were also represented in over-the-phone interviews (100% response). Organizations that participated in the study included ones that focus on children, healthcare, social justice, education, and community development – the gamut of nonprofit and community causes. Data were collected from May

through September 2019 after the Institutional Review Board at Illinois State University approved the study.

IV. Data Analysis and Findings

Analysis

The data collected from the mixed-methods research instrument was analyzed using descriptive statistics and qualitative thematic analysis. The data collected in the online questionnaire provided talking points in the semi-structured interviews, as well as a chance to validate information shared during the questionnaire and interview.

Additionally, identifiable data was collected during the questionnaire portion of the study. This data was used to ensure the respondent of the questionnaire and the interview was the same person. The specific type of student engagement was also ascertained. For example, respondents on the questionnaire selected which type of student engagement (e.g. volunteers, interns, service learning) they have most interacted with over the past several years. This categorical data was collected to compare to the findings of CESL's *Community Partner Survey* (2018) and in case any observable patterns emerged of a relationship between the impact of student engagement and the specific type of student engagement.

Interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke's primer on the method (2006). Thematic analysis is one of many qualitative data methods that consists of "cutting data up in order to put it together again in a manner that seems relevant and meaningful," (Harding, 2019, p.104). Gibson and Brown (2009) explain that the aims of thematic analysis are to examine commonalities, examine differences, and examine relationships (pp.128-129).

The actual process used was similar to the grounded theory methodology employed by Charmaz (2006), beginning with initial coding, followed by focused coding, and ending with

conceptual themes. However, no actual theory is being developed from the findings of this study, as it is being reported in an applied research context. Therefore, though the procedures are akin to grounded theory, it is not grounded theory in the classical sense (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Like grounded theory, the thematic analysis used was inductive. Rather than beginning with a theory and then finding supporting data, inductive analysis begins with the data and no presuming hypothesis or theory. As Braun and Clarke (2006) write, “Inductive analysis is therefore a process of coding the data *without* trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (p.89). To this aim, a literature review was conducted to design the research instrument, but no literature was consulted on the impact of student engagement until after the data was fully collected and coded. It should be acknowledged that it is impossible for the researcher to be completely unbiased and any interpretive data analysis is affected by the researcher's personal theories, worldviews, and education.

One such pre-existing theoretical framework used by the researcher was the essentialist approach, which “reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.86). With an essentialist approach, “you can theorise motivations, experiences, and meaning in a straight-forward way, because a simple, largely unidirectional relationship is assumed between meaning and experience and language” (p.91). Closely related was the researcher’s focus on only semantic themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) define the semantic approach as when “the themes are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said...” (p.90). Simply put, influenced by the essentialist approach and seeking semantic themes, the researcher

assumed that what a respondent said was what they meant and that what they meant could be clearly inferred.

After word-for-word transcription was completed for all interviews, data was sifted through, coded, and organized with similar ideas and concepts. Eventually, six overarching themes emerged from the data, which are reported and compared to the literature in the following section. An example of the coding process follows:

Step 1: Initial Coding - Identify phrases from the interview such as, “They don’t realize how much work it is to have all these volunteers; the university puts us in a difficult spot sometimes.”

Step 2: Focused Coding – Combine phrases or ideas with others that are alike to form a consolidated category, such as F1: *There can be a lot of training and costs associated with having so many volunteers come from ISU*.

Step 3: Themes – Combine similar categories with each other to identify overarching themes. In this example, the theme may be T1: *Partnering with ISU can be logistically straining for the organization.*

The above example is more straight-forward than reality, which often sees the researcher cycling between initial and focused codes throughout the process. For the current analysis, the coding concluded with 119 initial codes, 26 focused codes, and 6 themes. Thematic analysis and grounded theory procedures are frequently used for qualitative analysis and have previously been successfully used for analyzing university student engagement (Hahn, Brown, & Peters, 2015; McReynolds, 2014).

Questionnaire Results

The responses to the questionnaire, minus any identifying information, are presented in Appendix 3. Below are summary data from primary questions (Questions 2, 3 and 4) asking about the benefits, challenges, and the importance of ISU student engagement.

Question 2. To what extent has each of the following been a benefit of ISU student engagement with your organization over the past 3 years?

(from 1 = Not at All to 7 = Quite a Lot)

Table 1. Benefits of Student Engagement

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Saving my organization money because of the additional help	4.00	7.00	6.14
Making our community a better place to live	4.00	7.00	6.14
Increasing our access to University resources	2.00	7.00	4.43
Helping my organization move towards our goals	5.00	7.00	6.43
Helping my organization get funding	1.00	7.00	3.14
Building my organization's capacity	5.00	7.00	6.43
Bringing new energy or ideas to the organization	4.00	7.00	5.43

Table 1 above and Figure 1 on the following page illustrate the benefits that the representatives of the seven participating community organizations believe they experience when engaging with ISU students. Of note are the high means. On a scale from 1-7, with 1 meaning Not at All and 7 meaning Quite a Lot, the majority of the categories were rated above a 6. As visualized in Figure 1, the lowest rated category was in receiving help from the ISU students to obtain funding.

Figure 1. Benefits of ISU Student Engagement

Question 3. To what extent has each of the following been a challenge of ISU student engagement with your organization over the past 3 years?

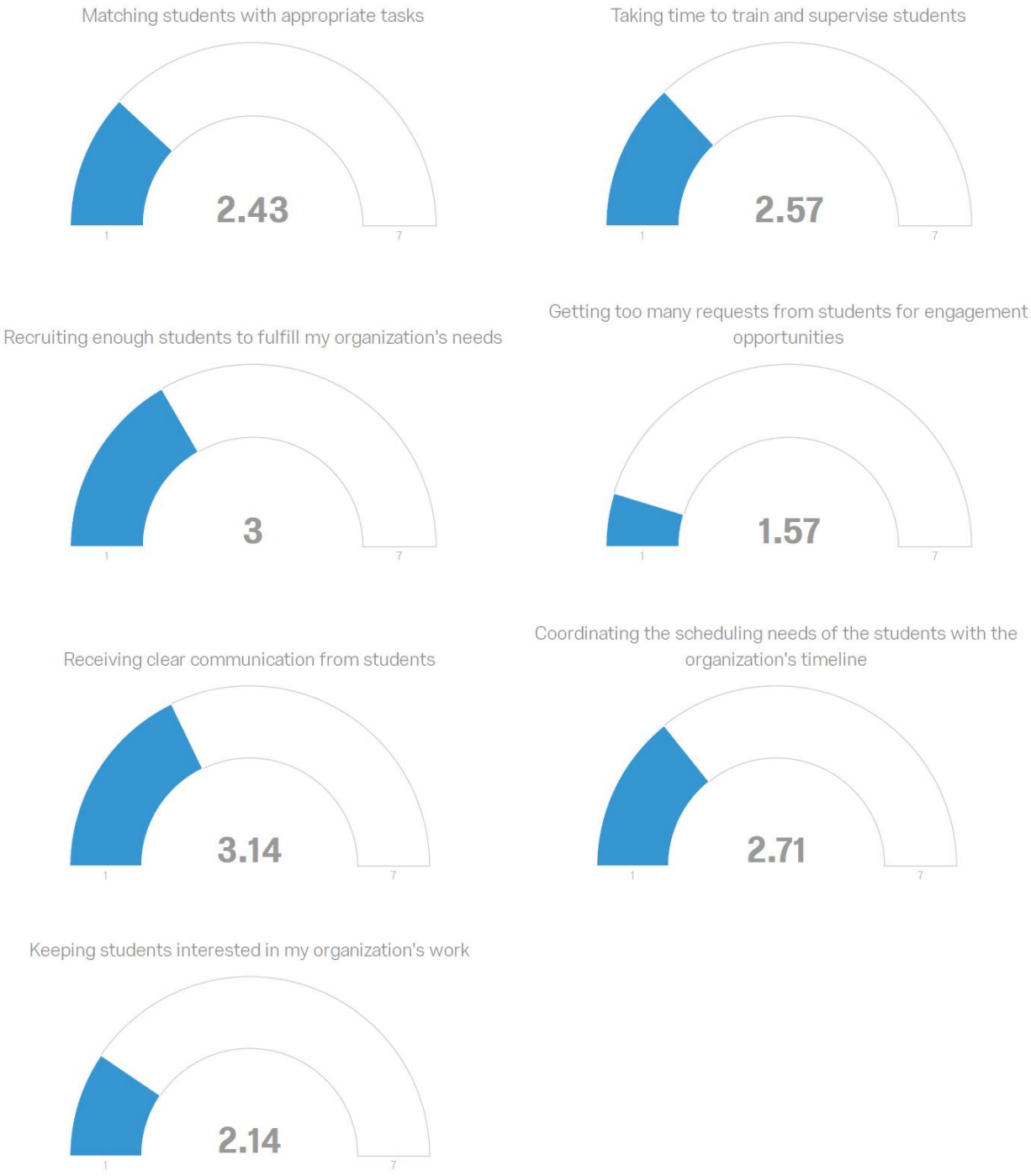
(from 1 = Not at All to 7 = Quite a Lot)

Table 2. Challenges of ISU Student Engagement

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Matching students with appropriate tasks	1.00	6.00	2.43
Taking time to train and supervise students	1.00	5.00	2.57
Recruiting enough students to fulfill my organization's needs	1.00	6.00	3.00
Getting too many requests from students for engagement opportunities	1.00	3.00	1.57
Receiving clear communication from students	1.00	6.00	3.14
Coordinating the scheduling needs of the students with the organization's timeline	1.00	6.00	2.71
Keeping students interested in my organization's work	1.00	5.00	2.14

Question 3, summarized in the above Table 2 and Figure 2 on the following page, asked participants to rate their perception of challenges they connected to ISU student engagement. The means are noticeably lower, showing that the effect of challenges caused by student engagement is perceived much less than the benefits associated with ISU student engagement. According to this data, the lowest-rated challenge is receiving too many requests from students for engagement opportunities. The high-rated challenge on the questionnaire is receiving clear communication from students.

Figure 2. Challenges of ISU Student Engagement



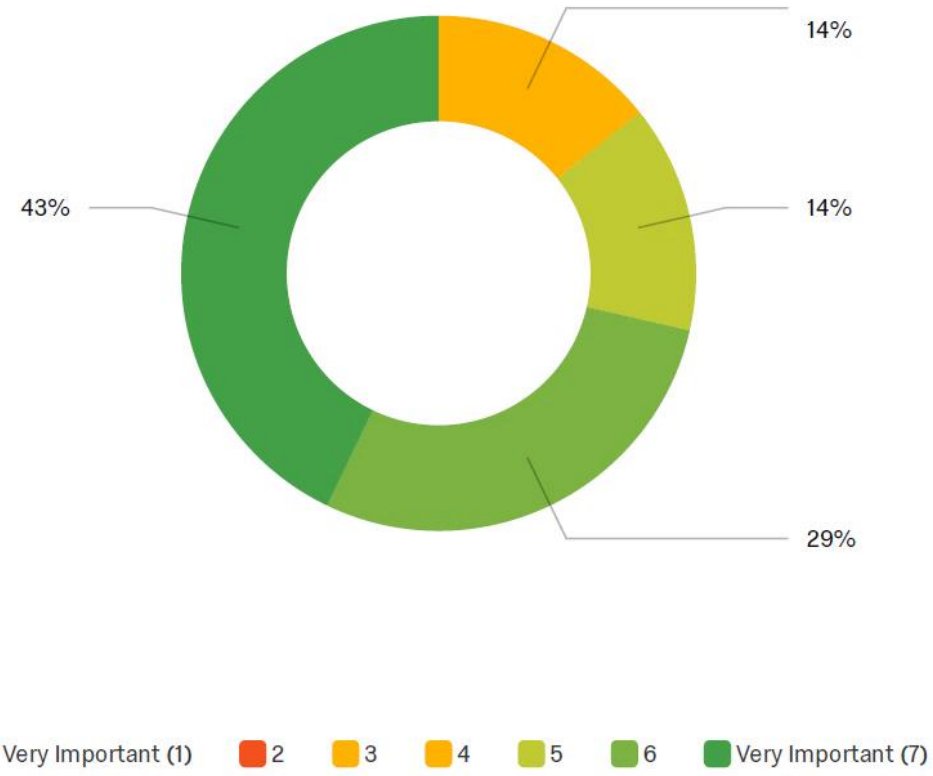
Question 4. Thinking about the work your organization has accomplished over the past 3 years, how important was the student engagement from ISU in getting this work accomplished? (from 1 = Not very important to 7 = Very Important)

Table 3. Importance of ISU Student Engagement

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Thinking about the work your organization has accomplished over the past 3 years, how important was the student engagement from ISU in getting this work accomplished?	4.00	7.00	6.00

This final question on the online questionnaire asked about the overall importance of ISU student engagement on the accomplishments of the community organization. The mean response was 6. As Figure 3 below shows, the participants who chose 5, 6, or 7 totaled 86% of the responses.

Figure 3. Importance of ISU Student Engagement



The data collected from the online survey reveal that the participants consider the benefits of ISU students to outweigh the challenges, and that ISU student engagement is important for the accomplishments of the organization. Such findings are further explored in the interview data.

Interview Results

Through the process of thematic analysis, six broad themes emerged from the interviews: (1) There are drawbacks to working with ISU students; (2) Communication is a major challenge; (3) Long-term student engagement creates more positive impacts than short-term student engagement; (4) ISU students provide unique assets; (5) ISU student engagement plays a key role in a partner organization's plans; and (6) ISU students and the campus community are vital to the long-term success of partner organizations. The six themes themselves can be grouped into three categories: negative impacts, mixed impacts, and positive impacts. The following section will share the six themes, organized via these three categories. Along with evidence found within the current study, scholarship from past studies will also be used to support the emergence of the themes. The confidential interviews are cited by respondent organization, with Respondent 1 (R1) representing one community organization, Respondent 2 (R2) representing a second organization, and so forth.

Negative Impacts

To be clear, the benefits of ISU student engagement were consistently reported to far outweigh any negative impacts. This sentiment was obvious throughout the interview process, but also evident in the questionnaire. When asked, "To what extent has each of the following been a benefit of ISU student engagement with your organization over the past 3 years?" with 1

being “Not at All” and 7 being “Quite a Lot” the average mean was 5.45. Contrast this with the average mean for “To what extent has each of the following been a challenge of ISU student engagement with your organization over the past 3 years?” being 2.51 on the same scale from 1 (Not at All) to 7 (Quite a Lot). Despite the generally positive perceptions community organizations have regarding the impact of ISU student engagement, two themes emerged from the interview data that highlight the challenges of working with ISU students.

Theme 1. There are drawbacks to working with ISU students.

There are always challenges in any type of relationship, and that includes community organizations and ISU students. One challenge is that the requirements of classes or proposed internships and projects do not always fit well with an organization’s goals. As one community partner shared, “Occasionally...we have people approach us about things that just won’t fit. Sometimes we’ve still taken them on, and it’s been a challenge because their project has been okay, but it really isn’t helpful for us. So that’s been a challenge – just fitting into the specifics of a class” (R4). Such projects often end up burdensome for the organization and create additional challenges (Wagner & Mathison, 2015, p.90).

Another challenge arises from the constant turnover of students engaged with the community organization. A respondent that has ISU students work with children spoke to the amount of turnover and the impact it has on the children the organization serves: “For kids who already don’t have that stability in their life, to constantly have to build that trust year to year to year is very hard” (R1). The turnover affects more than those served by an organization, it also impacts the organization’s staff. A respondent who oversees interns bemoaned this fact when they explained that, “From my perspective, the only real, significant challenge is that I

start over every year...It's a wonderful experience and I help grow that person into a professional and then they leave, and I have to start over" (R6).

Other challenges to working with ISU students include the additional paperwork, logistics, and time that is often required to supervise or organize students. One example is administering background checks. According to CESL's *Community Partner Survey*, 47% of responding organizations always require background checks and 36% require them for certain situations (2018, p.12). Constantly running background checks can be costly and time-consuming, especially if a student only engages with the organization for a short period of time. CESL's *Community Partner Survey* (2018) also found that the majority of community partners use Excel for volunteer tracking, which can be a cumbersome process (p.11). Frustration over paperwork and time commitment were also found to be challenges for community partners in previous studies (George-Paschal, Hawkins, & Graybeal, 2019; Sandy & Holland, 2006).

Theme 2. Communication is a major challenge.

It is no surprise that communication can be a challenge between community organizations and ISU students. Clear communication is an oft-cited barrier for community partnerships and has been reported in past studies (e.g. McReynolds, 2014; Sandy & Holland, 2006). However, the specific challenge of communication warrants its own theme in this analysis because of how often it came up during the interviews. Every single interviewee made at least one mention of the challenge of communicating with students. Additionally, during the questionnaire portion of the study, "Receiving clear communication from students" was the highest rated (i.e. most severe) challenge of ISU student engagement.

Several respondents mentioned that the lack of communication was most frustrating when related to daily schedules. R5 shared that students frequently arrive late or leave early from events without communicating with their coordinator. Another respondent was frustrated when one of their student interns alerted them last minute that they were sick. “You’re allowed to get sick, but we still run a business here. So for me, don’t text me at midnight. Because I’m not going to see it until the morning. So treat it more like a job, instead of just with your friends” (R7).

Another example of the challenge of communication relates specifically to the academic calendar. One respondent complained that “students are really in tune with their schedule, but they may not be in tune with ours. So, for instance, if there’s a fall break, they’ll just assume that we know that they’ll be gone. And we don’t necessarily operate that way” (R3). Previous research studies have similarly reported the frustration partner organizations have with academic term lengths (Worrall, 2007, p.12) and the “need to work around the semester schedules” (George-Paschal, Hawkins, & Graybeal, 2019, p.57).

These findings concur with those of CESL’s *Community Partner Survey* (2018), which found that 16% of community partners did not agree or strongly agree that “The partnership makes clear and open communication an ongoing priority...” (p.7). The *Community Partner Survey* also found that when asked about what to include in a useful toolkit for community organizations, several specifically mentioned material to help them better communicate with students (p.13). Communication is a frequent challenge for any organization on an individual basis, but the prevalence of it throughout the interviews suggests a more widespread, systemic concern.

Mixed Impacts

Many interviewees discussed the idea of balance in their relationship with ISU student engagement. Respondents were realistic in their expectations that sometimes student engagement was more beneficial than other times, and that although the benefits generally outweigh the challenges, there are specific times when student engagement makes no net impact on the organization. Regarding student engagement, one respondent said that "I think it's worth it, but it's a challenge," (R6). Similar sentiments were shared amongst all respondents. A related theme that emerged was the difference between short-term and long-term student engagement.

Theme 3. Long-term student engagement creates more positive impacts than short-term student engagement.

Most of the study's respondents pointed to internships and longer-term student engagement having a more positive impact on the community organization and as their preferred method of student engagement. This finding corroborates CESL's *Community Partner Survey* (2018) which asked community partners to rank the kind of engagement they most need from ISU and found the highest-ranked need was ongoing volunteers (p.8).

The reason why long-term engagement was more beneficial was often credited to the ability to develop relationships with both the organization's staff and with those that the organization serves. One community respondent shared that "Students that come back regularly develop not only a relationship with the institution but also with the staff and with our guests" (R2). The same respondent said that if a student engages with their organization for at least 15-20 hours they will be engaging "...long enough to really experience what it's [the

organization] is like...we get to know them more and there is more exposure and more relationship built over that time frame" (R2). The literature reflects this, as shown by Wagner & Mathison (2015). They write that one of the key principles for community-based engagement is to "pursue sustained partnerships rather than one-time projects" (p.91).

In addition to relationship building, the longer a student spends with an organization the more the organization feels the onboarding process is worth it. R5 remarked that "The hardest challenge is taking the time to train and supervise students." If a student only serves at an organization for a short time it is often not worth the cost, both in time and funding, to train them.

Some organizations combat this dilemma by requiring students to commit to a minimum number of hours before they spend the resources training them. Others accept short-term students but try to encourage them to stay longer than their initial commitment. As one respondent said, "Sometimes you think, wow, when they only serve an hour or only two hours and it took an hour to train them. That is not the balance that we want. So during the training process, we try to engage them in a way that encourages them to stay with us as long as possible..." (R2).

Community partners also complained about the community service hour requirement of some classes and how it encouraged students to volunteer for only a short period of time. "There are a lot of things that you simply can't experience or measure if you are only here for a few hours. The quality of their experience increases significantly when they reach that 15-hour plus mark" (R2). Such frustration over a set hour requirement for students is not unique to this study. Citing Eyler, Giles, & Braxton (1997), Mabry (1998), and Patterson (1987), Sandy &

Holland (2006) found in their own research that "Community partners were unanimous in expressing their desire to provide service-learning experiences of adequate duration" and that faculty, students, and community partners all emphasize "the importance of time as a learning factor" (p.39).

Despite the preference and higher impact of long-term student engagement, several participants acknowledged that there is still a need for short-term or one-day engagement situations. Events that simply require many adult volunteers or physical labor are especially conducive to this type of engagement. This short-term need is also reflected in the findings of CESL's *Community Partner Survey* (2018), which found the second most-requested student engagement need was volunteers for special events, outranked only by the ongoing volunteers, as mentioned above (p.9). One community partner said that even while short-term university students "may not be able to provide a long-term relationship with [our clients] ...they can definitely help the event function. It helps that there's an extra pair of eyes" (R1). While every community respondent preferred long-term engagement from students, such as internships, they accept that there is still a place for short-term involvement and that the lives of students do not always make long-term involvement a realistic option.

Positive Impacts

As already mentioned, according to the community partners who responded to this study, the positive impacts of ISU student engagement far outweigh the negatives. The majority of all comments made by interview respondents can be considered positive, and this finding agrees with past studies that found that the "contributions of university student volunteers more than offset any opportunity costs incurred by participating organizations" (Edwards et al.,

2001, p. 459). The following themes are further supported by the results of the online questionnaire. The final question of the online questionnaire asked, “Thinking about the work your organization has accomplished over the past 3 years, how important was the student engagement from ISU in getting this work accomplished?” On a scale from 1 (Not Very Important) to 7 (Very Important), the mean score was 6. Overall, the community respondents viewed ISU student engagement has very beneficial, positive, and important.

Theme 4. ISU students provide unique assets.

The fourth major theme that emerged from the data was the overall feeling that the skillset and experiences that students bring with them to community organizations are a tremendous advantage. Such sentiment was already recorded in 2018 during CESL’s *Community Partner Survey* when the survey found that 92% of community partners believed that their partnership with ISU “values multiple kinds of knowledge and life experiences” (p.7). Respondents to the current study mirrored this finding.

One respondent praised the unique assets students bring, saying that “each has their own specific set of skills they are bringing based on their school and background. They’re coming in and they really have a solid foundation...and they’re really trying to apply the principles and the theories within our environment” (R1). Ferman and Hill (2004) also found that community partners greatly value students bringing university knowledge, theories, and resources with them when they engage with the organization.

Students’ passions and interests were another positive. One organization leader shared that “Their talents are helpful for us. If [ISU students] have a passion and talent for it, we want to do programming with it” (R4). R6 expressed that “students bring with them a freshness,

generally, and an enthusiasm and curiosity, and excitement." Pickeral and Peters (1998) similarly found that community organizations appreciate the energy and enthusiasm brought by university students.

Respondents from several organizations specifically mentioned their appreciation for the "fresh eyes" and new perspectives students can provide. As one respondent expressed, "I think we are lucky because ISU attracts students from beyond our local community so we get students here who didn't grow up here, so we are getting fresh eyes on our programming and how we do things" (R4). Such benefits are similar to those found by Ibáñez-Carrasco and Riaño-Alcalá (2011) and George-Paschal, Hawkins, and Graybeal (2019).

Students also help community organizations by providing connections to campus clubs and groups. Several organizations mentioned this role that students can play in helping the organization gain access to new volunteers and resources on campus. One community partner gave a detailed example:

> I think on the positive side of everything they're involved with, sometimes we take advantage of that as well. So we were talking about service organizations. We had a student who was part of a service organization and so when we needed extra volunteers for things we knew we could reach out to her organization and they could help. So we have definitely connected with some of those organizations through our volunteers and used their help because of that. (R4)

In summarizing the unique assets that ISU students provide, one interviewee shared that "We think the student leadership is the strongest it's ever been. They're not shy, they don't mind public speaking, they don't mind asking for money, they are good leaders. They come to us as good leaders" (R5).

Theme 5. ISU student engagement plays a key role in a partner organization's plans.

Because community organizations realize the unique assets students provide and the positive impact that can have on an organization, many organizations include ISU student engagement in their plans. The consistent supply of student volunteers is not taken for granted by community partners but is often relied on for special events and long-term plans. One organization hosts an annual event that requires physical labor. For many years it was a struggle to attract the right students to help with the event or find volunteers from the community. However, for the past several years they have partnered with a registered student organization. "It has a long-term impact in that we can expect the help, so when we are planning, we know that that help is coming" (R4).

Several other partners expressed relief in knowing where the help for the organization will be coming from. "Just knowing we have those partnerships and those volunteers coming in it's a guaranteed program for us..." (R1). One respondent recounted how they used to struggle because they had no staff to fill a certain position, but now they have a student intern each semester and work with ISU faculty to ensure that position is always filled. In describing this relationship, the respondent said, "It's been great. It takes a lot of the pressure off..." (R7). Knowing students will fill certain roles allows the organization to spend time on higher priorities and frees up staff to address other areas of concern for the organization (Edwards et al., 2001).

University students being included in an organization's plans is not an observation unique to Normal, IL. Sandy and Holland (2006) concluded in their study of community organizations in California that students "are a critical part of the workforce of some partner organizations and help sustain and extend the capacity of K-12 and nonprofit organizations,

often enabling them to take on new projects that would have remained on the back burner" (p.35).

A separate, but related, issue is that of funding. Many nonprofits struggle to raise enough funds to keep all their programs operating. The low cost of student labor should not be dismissed and has been observed in previous studies on the benefits of student engagement (Worrall, 2007). One respondent of the present study admitted, "As a nonprofit, we can't afford to pay as many workers as we need, so the students help us with that" (R2). Another interviewee straightforwardly explained that student engagement is "easy on our budgets" (R6). Recalling the current environment for nonprofit organizations, another shared that "We've all seen our funding decrease, and honestly, they [ISU students] are keeping programs open, and that's amazing" (R5).

Theme 6. ISU students and the campus community are vital to the long-term success of partner organizations.

The final theme that emerged from the thematic analysis is that the organizations involved in this study truly perceive the success of their organizations intertwined with ISU student engagement and the ISU campus. Several respondents spoke about the long-term benefits of student engagement, such as capacity-building and community outreach. The value of students was described as "immeasurable" (R4), and one respondent claimed that "Without ISU students our operations wouldn't run, so it's extremely critical to have them" (R3). Another participant in the study stressed, "The students allow us to impact this community in a way that we would not be able to do without them" (R2). Despite the potential negative impacts of student engagement previously discussed, the potential benefits are inexhaustible. Such

findings are evident in the current study and have been documented in past research (e.g. Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Gray et al., 2000; Prentice & Garcia, 2000).

The success of community organizations is also dependent on quality staff, which several respondents claimed is also affected by student engagement. “We’ve had some students who came here part-time and they’ve been here for years” (R4) said one participant, with another explaining that they prefer to hire student volunteers as paid staff: “It is also a huge asset to me because the onboarding is significantly less if I’m hiring from a volunteer or intern rather than someone off the street” (R2).

Organizations pointed to positive impacts of student engagement as stemming from a “cultural attitude of the university that they should serve their community in a way that benefits both the community and the learner” (R2). In addition to the university’s campus culture, several community partners specifically mentioned ISU’s Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CESL) as an important factor. One respondent recalled an event hosted by CESL where they were able to meet with professors and discuss potential partnerships. Citing this opportunity to meet professors, they view CESL as “...hugely valuable to us” (R2). Another respondent went into further detail about how CESL has played an important role in their organization’s relationship with student engagement:

> I would say, previously, before CESL, it was who do you contact? How do you solicit volunteers or how do you attract students for a project? If you don’t know a professor, how do you do that. Before CESL existed it always seemed so vast and impenetrable and like “I don’t even know where to start.” And that would deter me from even attempting it, because it would just be cast out into the ether, and where would it go, and what if it was the wrong person? What if they’re on sabbatical or something and it’s lost forever. So that previously was a challenge, but after CESL has come in, I feel confident that I can get a quick answer and now we have a direct contact that can help navigate that for us. (R4)

Whether through internships, community service projects, single-event volunteering, or any of the myriad ways ISU students can engage with community organizations it is clear from this study that ISU students make a significant and positive impact. One interviewee said they "couldn't imagine the community without the involvement of ISU" (R3), while another participant echoed by saying, "I know that we wouldn't be able to do all we do without ISU students working here and volunteering here" (R4). The responses during each interview varied greatly from organization to organization, but this appreciation for ISU student engagement was consistent across every single interview.

V. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and feedback throughout the research process, two recommendations follow. The first recommendation is for slight modifications to the research instrument based on its reception during the procedures of the study. The second recommendation addresses the primary challenge of working with ISU students that was identified by the community partners, that of communication.

Recommendation 1: Adjust the Questionnaire and Interview Questions

The first recommendation is concerned with the research instrument used in the study. Overall, no major flaws or concerns were observed with the instrument and it effectively met its goal of being efficient and sufficient simultaneously. However, one interviewer mentioned the questionnaire instrument could be clearer about who was being impacted. “Are we talking about the impact of the organization or the students” they asked (R2). After some discussion, that respondent concluded the questionnaire was referring to the impact on the community organization, which was the original intent of the researcher. Yet, they stressed throughout their interview that it does not matter how much impact students are bringing to the organization if the students are not also being impacted. “We want to make sure those students are getting a quality experience” they related. While this is an admirable stance, it is not necessarily applicable to all community organizations. Therefore, when CESL is presented the final instrument it will be revised from the appended version to more clearly explain that the direction of impact the questionnaire is concerned with is the impact that ISU students are having on the community organization.

The second protocol recommendation is the order of questions for the semi-structured interview. The original question order proceeded from "What are some examples of how ISU student engagement has been a benefit for your organization in the short-term?" to asking for examples of long-term challenges. It was found during the interviews that the conversation flowed smoother when it first focused on short-term (both benefits and challenges) and then moved to long-term benefits and challenges. For this reason, the question order was switched and presented thus in the appendices. At no point was the order of questions detrimental to data collection and this recommendation is purely one of preference to encourage the natural flow of the semi-structured interview.

Recommendation 2: Address Concerns Over Student Communication

While several challenges of ISU student engagement were identified by the community respondents, their concern over student communication stood out as particularly acute due to its prevalence and severity. There was noticeable frustration of receiving insufficient or unprofessional communication from ISU students regarding their engagement activity.

There could be a variety of reasons that current university students struggle with communicating with partner organizations. One reason may relate to technology and the age difference between most students and those running organizations, with the advent of the smartphone having a significant impact on the social interaction among this generation (Twenge, 2017). Bradbury (2018) reports that Gen Z and Millennials collectively communicate 26% in-person and 74% digitally. These figures can help contextualize the situation described earlier of the intern texting at midnight regarding a sick day. The study participant, who

oversees student engagement at a partner organization, identifies texting as something to do "with your friends" whereas the student may not limit texting to only that social situation.

Another explanation for the miscommunication that was offered by several interviewees was simply a student's lack of job and life experience. One respondent addressed this: "I think the secondary challenge just goes along with utilizing students who aren't yet fully professionals" (R6). Another respondent offered an example of this inexperience. They shared that while all volunteers must complete a waiver, students often do not complete it with the necessary seriousness. "Sometimes the waivers come back with the emergency contact number being 911 or the emergency contact is Jesus. Things such as that" (R5). The suggestion that communication relates to a lack of life experience has been reported in previous research on student engagement and service learning. Sandy and Holland (2006) found that some community partners believed service-learners to be inadequately prepared for the workplace, while an earlier study found students to be reliable and skilled, but unprepared, inconsistent, and needing supervision (Vernon & Ward, 1999). Regarding generational differences in early work experience, Schroth (2019) writes that "Work, especially entry-level jobs, helps teens learn what is expected in the workplace and how to interact effectively with others" (p.6). University students are reportedly coming to these service projects and volunteer opportunities with less and less job experience. In 1979, 60% of teens held a job, while in 2015, 34% of teens held a job and it is expected to drop to 25% by 2024 (Morisi, 2017).

Regardless of the reasons, communication is identified as a major challenge for organizations interacting with students at ISU. It is therefore recommended that ISU's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning address this challenge. The way forward

could include many options. The Center could require some type of training on the expectations of communication when it directly assists with partnerships. For example, when the Center arranges a group engagement activity, it could share information on communicating during an orientation or during the van ride to the community organization.

CESL is already involved in educating faculty regarding best practices of university-community engagement. Because of CESL, many community organizations are better able to connect with faculty and the faculty better understand how to create service-learning opportunities. Through this avenue, CESL could further educate and encourage faculty on the importance of clear communication between the students and the community partner, adding to the resources it already provides (“Toolkits,” 2018). For example, CESL could work with an internship coordinator to help disseminate useful communication resources or handouts to students. A professor could also require students to learn communication skills prior to being assigned a community service project. Potential resources are available from Campus Compact (“Interpersonal Communication,” 2009) and Stanford University (“Student-Teacher Communication,” n.d.)

However, many students engage in the community without directly interacting with CESL, and the Center only has so much influence over the student body. Therefore, a more significant intervention is required. One possibility is to introduce communication skills to University College, a program that helps students, “make successful transitions to Illinois State University” ("About,” 2019). Primarily focusing on freshmen, University College aims to increase retention and provide academic advising. The program could potentially influence many students at ISU by including communication skills in its list of programs.

Individual programs and offices, such as CESL and University College, may be unable to effectively provide the necessary communication skills to the entire student body. Another possibility that would affect all students involves the required general education classes. Illinois State University is currently undergoing the process to redesign its general education curriculum. Therefore, it may be the perfect time to institute a practical communications class or life skills course as a general education requirement. Many possibilities exist to improve the communication skills of ISU students. If ISU cares about its community partners, then the concern they share over student communication skills must be seriously addressed.

VI. Conclusion

The present research project set out with two primary goals. The first goal was to answer the research question from Illinois State University's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning: *What measurable impact does student engagement have on community organizations partnering with Illinois State University?* Through an in-depth reading of the relevant literature, particularly studies that have measured student impact, the research instrument (Appendices 1 and 2) was created. Due to the internal and external validity checks, as well as the precedent set by previous studies, the author is confident the research instrument accurately and sufficiently answered the question of whether and how students engaging with community organizations make a difference.

In addition to the instrument answering the research question, the tool is also part of a larger evaluation cycle. The instrument was designed to be used on a three-year cycle. Organizations that participate in the pilot study will not be contacted again for three years. During the second and third year of implementing this evaluation plan, all other organizations that have a partnering relationship with ISU, regardless of length, will be contacted. Thus, the second goal of CESL was to create an instrument and research process that could realistically be performed by undergraduate students and was not an overbearing inconvenience for study participants. A participant's time commitment to complete both the online questionnaire and interview is less than forty-five minutes. This means, from the perspective of the community organization, it will only need to participate in a brief evaluation process every three years. Yet CESL is receiving data from the rotating community partner organizations every year. The minimal time commitment and the fact that CESL is seeking to evaluate and improve impact will

encourage long-term participation from the community organizations. While effective, the research instrument is also simple. The questionnaire was designed to be used by itself if needed. Ideally, the interviews will enhance and deepen the understanding of what is reported in the questionnaire. But if for some reason CESL cannot perform the interviews, they can still collect useful data from the questionnaire. The questionnaire is simple enough to be administered by any student with minimal to no training. While interviewing and qualitative analysis requires some experience and training, most students will be able to perform the necessary duties with limited classroom exposure.

Applied research is meant to help clients make a decision about a particular situation or problem (Baimyrzaeva, 2018). The current research project was not meant to be an intellectual exercise, but a practical and useful application of research. To that extent, both goals of the project have been suitably met. A simple and useful evaluation tool was created, and some answers to the research question were found. Additionally, the instrument and pilot study provide a model for how other universities can assess the impact of their own students on community organizations.

Through thematic analysis, six key themes emerged from the interviews. Respondents shared that there are challenges to working with ISU students, especially when it comes to receiving clear communication from the students. The interviewees also expressed that long-term engagement, such as an internship, creates more positive impacts for the organization than short-term or single-event engagement. However, despite generally preferring long-term engagement, many organizations also admitted there is still a need for one-time events that simply require extra help.

The positive impacts of ISU student engagement made up the bulk of the interview data. The research found that ISU students provide unique assets that community organizations appreciate, like their knowledge of a discipline's latest theories. ISU student engagement also plays a key role in the plans of community organizations. Many depend on established partnerships to keep their organization running and use ISU students to free up staff to work on higher priorities and provide cheap or free labor.

The final theme evident through the research was that ISU students and the ISU campus is intimately connected with the long-term success of a partnering organization. Whether they credited student knowledge, volunteer work ethic, or the campus culture and work of CESL, every organization expressed an almost-identical sentiment: They could not do what they do without ISU students engaging with their organization.

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Addendum on How this Capstone Project Related to the Researcher's Field Placement

During the second year of a master's program in political science at Illinois State University, the researcher was placed with the local Boy Scouts organization, the W.D. Boyce Council. While there, the researcher served as the ScoutReach Coordinator for Bloomington-Normal. ScoutReach provides free Cub Scout programming to low-income boys and girls K-5.

To fulfill requirements for the Applied Community and Economic Development sequence (ACED), a capstone project aims to address a significant issue or problem encountered during the ACED fellow's professional practice experience. This paper focuses on ISU's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CESL) and its goal to measure the impact ISU students have on community organizations. However, the study nevertheless has had significant import for the W.D. Boyce Council.

Findings from the literature review and interview analysis directly contributed to two changes made at the W.D. Boyce Council. The first change was the introduction of an evaluation tool for ScoutReach lessons. The second change brought on by the capstone research was to explore the possibility of additional interns in ScoutReach to replace part-time workers. These changes, supported by this capstone project, were introduced by the researcher and will continue to shape the ScoutReach program into the future.

ScoutReach Evaluation Tool

Throughout the research process, the importance of effective evaluation was stressed time and again. The capstone evolved from the need for the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning to better understand the impact of ISU students on

community organizations. CESL needed an evaluation tool to plan for the future, prove their value to stakeholders, and ensure their work was fulfilling their goals.

Similarly, ScoutReach needed an evaluation tool. The ScoutReach program provides "lesson plans" for part-time workers to use in delivering the program. For example, one day was about recycling. A lesson plan was written by the researcher on the general concepts of recycling to teach to the youth, along with an activity of using an old soda bottle to craft a bird feeder. No matter how much planning goes into the curriculum, the effectiveness of the program is uncertain until actually tested. Therefore, based on the literature reviewed for creating CESL's evaluation tool, the researcher also designed an evaluation instrument for the ScoutReach program. The instrument measures the experience of the participating youth based on the perceptions of the staff, as well as inquiring into whether the staff felt they were sufficiently supported by the written lesson plan. Printed copies of the evaluations were given to the staff at their monthly meetings and given time to honestly provide feedback for the past month's lessons. While this method for collecting the data was not the fastest, it was recent enough after the programming that the staff could easily remember how it went, and by having the staff complete the evaluations at the monthly, in-person meetings it assured a one-hundred percent response rate. A template of the evaluation tool is provided in Appendix 4.

Results from the ScoutReach program evaluations have already altered how certain lessons are run. For example, one activity ended up being highly valued by older youth (3rd-5th grade). The evaluations from staff who worked with that group rated the program as being very well-received. However, the activity was too complicated for younger youth (K-2nd grade), so staff reception of the activity was much more negative. Going forward, the program must

either be adapted to the different ages or removed altogether to ensure the best programming for all youth.

ScoutReach Internships

While the necessity of evaluation was stressed during the pre-data collection phase of the capstone, the findings that emerged from the data were also helpful in pushing forward a change for ScoutReach. The third theme found from the CESL analysis was that long-term student engagement creates more positive impacts than short-term student engagement. The current capstone project, in addition to several previous studies such as Sandy and Holland (2006), concludes that internships are one of the most effective means of student engagement. Having the same student over a semester or longer and in a committed role is much more impactful than a few hours here and there.

The ScoutReach program currently operates within this short-term framework. Students are hired for a semester at a time and only work a few hours a week. Staff turnover is very high from one semester to another, and the employed students can have low motivation for providing excellent program delivery. With these concerns in mind and with the findings of this capstone research in support, ScoutReach is currently exploring how to transition from part-time staff to interns. The goal is to have a few highly committed interns rather than several part-time workers. ScoutReach leadership has already met with advisors and internship coordinators of several departments at Illinois State University to explore what a partnership would look like. Since this change is a recent development, a year-long internship could not be established for the 2019-2020 academic year. However, ScoutReach is currently interviewing candidates for a Spring 2020 internship via the Sociology department.

Even though the capstone project focused on the needs of ISU's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, valuable effects still came to the ScoutReach program. By introducing a new program evaluation tool and moving towards interns rather than part-time staff, the ScoutReach program will continue to benefit from the research conducted for this capstone.

Appendix 1 – Online Questionnaire

During the questionnaire, you will see the term "student engagement."

Student engagement is any time ISU students interact with your organization – it could be as volunteers, for a class project, conducting research for you, a service-learning program, etc.

Please keep these interactions with ISU students in mind as you answer the following questions.

1. In what capacity have most ISU students engaged with your organization over the past 3 years? *Check all that apply*
   - ❑ Individual student volunteers
   - ❑ Groups of student volunteers
   - ❑ Fundraising
   - ❑ Internship/practicum
   - ❑ Student research project
   - ❑ Service-learning project

BENEFITS

2. To what extent have each of the following been a **benefit** of ISU student engagement with your organization over the past 3 years?

	Not at All						Quite a Lot
Making our community a better place to live	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Helping my organization move towards our goals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Building my organization's capacity	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Helping my organization get funding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Saving my organization money because of the additional help	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Bringing new energy or ideas to the organization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Increasing our access to University resources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

CHALLENGES

3. To what extent have each of the following been a **challenge** of ISU student engagement with your organization over the past 3 years?

	Not at All						Quite a Lot
Matching students with appropriate tasks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Taking time to train and supervise students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Recruiting enough students to fulfill my organization's needs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Getting too many requests from students for engagement opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Receiving clear communication from students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Coordinating the scheduling needs of the students with the organization's timeline	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Keeping students interested in my organization's work	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

4. Thinking about the work your organization has accomplished over the past 3 years, how important was the engagement from ISU students in getting this work accomplished?

Not Very Important						Very Important
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix 2 – Interview Questions

For these questions, I'd like you to think of ISU student engagement with your organization over the past 3 years. What I mean by student engagement is any time ISU students interact with your organization – it could be as volunteers, for a class project, conducting research for you, or a service-learning program.

1. What do ISU students engaged with your organization primarily do? Examples of tasks?

2. What are some examples of how ISU student engagement has been a benefit for your organization in the short-term?

3. What are some examples of how ISU student engagement has been a challenge for your organization in the short-term?

4. What are some examples of how ISU student engagement has been a benefit for your organization in the long-term?

5. What are some examples of how ISU student engagement has been a challenge for your organization in the long-term?

6. Has your interaction with ISU students or their level of impact on your organization changed in the past three years? How so?

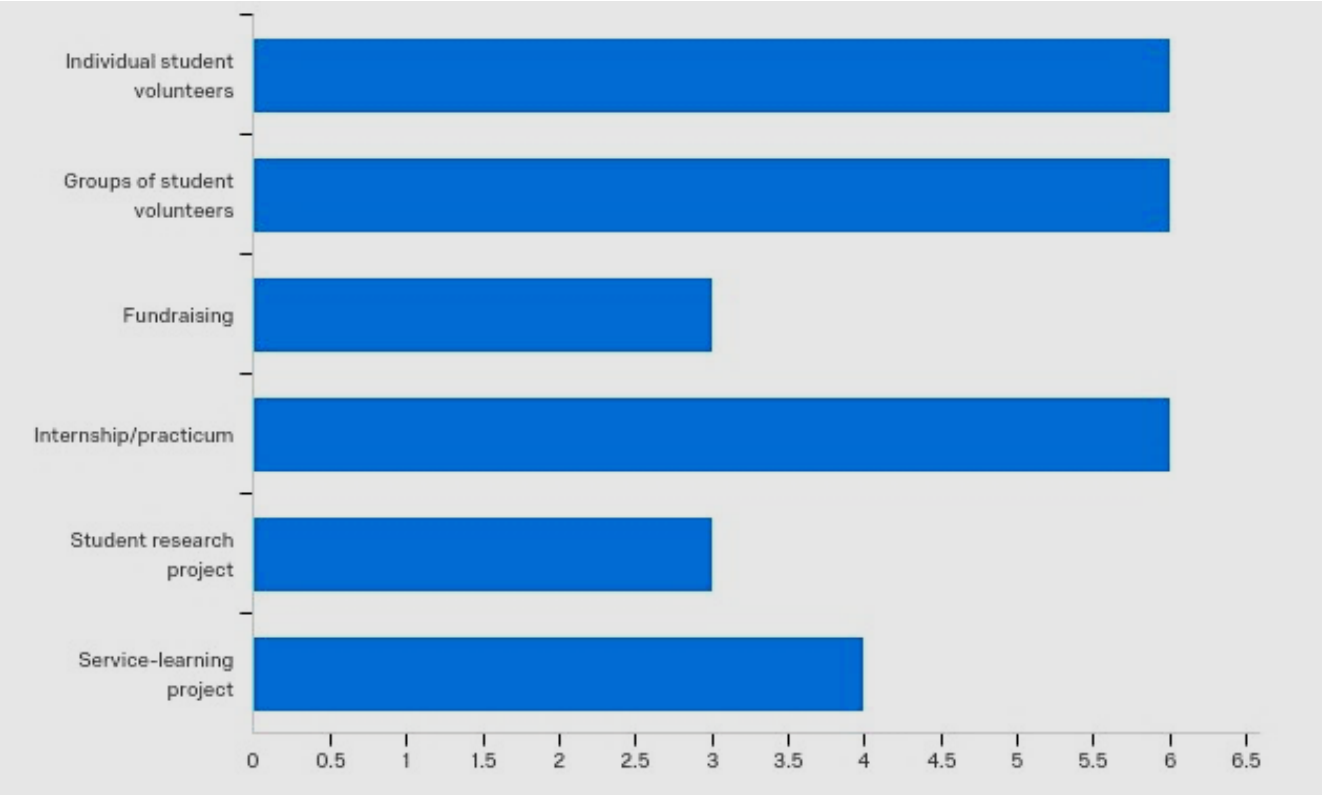
7. How is working with ISU students different from working with your typical non-student volunteer?

8. Do you have any comments about your responses to the questionnaire?

9. Are there any other comments you would like to make about the impact of ISU students on your organization?

Appendix 3 – Questionnaire Results

Question 1. In what capacity have most ISU students engaged with your organization over the past 3 years? (Select all the apply)



Question 2. To what extent has each of the following been a benefit of ISU student engagement with your organization over the past 3 years?

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Making our community a better place to live	4.00	7.00	6.14	1.12	1.27	7
2	Helping my organization move towards our goals	5.00	7.00	6.43	0.73	0.53	7
3	Building my organization’s capacity	5.00	7.00	6.43	0.73	0.53	7
4	Helping my organization get funding	1.00	7.00	3.14	2.36	5.55	7
5	Saving my organization money because of the additional help	4.00	7.00	6.14	1.12	1.27	7
6	Bringing new energy or ideas to the organization	4.00	7.00	5.43	1.05	1.10	7
7	Increasing our access to University resources	2.00	7.00	4.43	1.50	2.24	7

#	Question	Not At All (1)		2		3		4		5		6		Quite a Lot (7)		Total
1	Making our community a better place to live	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	57.14%	4	7
2	Helping my organization move towards our goals	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	28.57%	2	57.14%	4	7
3	Building my organization's capacity	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	28.57%	2	57.14%	4	7
4	Helping my organization get funding	42.86%	3	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	7
5	Saving my organization money because of the additional help	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	57.14%	4	7
6	Bringing new energy or ideas to the organization	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	28.57%	2	14.29%	1	42.86%	3	14.29%	1	7
7	Increasing our access to University resources	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	57.14%	4	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	7

Question 3. To what extent has each of the following been a challenge of ISU student engagement with your organization over the past 3 years?

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Matching students with appropriate tasks	1.00	6.00	2.43	1.59	2.53	7
2	Taking time to train and supervise students	1.00	5.00	2.57	1.29	1.67	7
3	Recruiting enough students to fulfill my organization's needs	1.00	6.00	3.00	1.77	3.14	7
4	Getting too many requests from students for engagement opportunities	1.00	3.00	1.57	0.73	0.53	7
5	Receiving clear communication from students	1.00	6.00	3.14	1.55	2.41	7
6	Coordinating the scheduling needs of the students with the organization's timeline	1.00	6.00	2.71	1.58	2.49	7
7	Keeping students interested in my organization's work	1.00	5.00	2.14	1.36	1.84	7

#	Question	Not At All (1)		2		3		4		5		6		Quite a Lot (7)		Total
1	Matching students with appropriate tasks	28.57%	2	42.86%	3	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	7
2	Taking time to train and supervise students	14.29%	1	57.14%	4	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	7
3	Recruiting enough students to fulfill my organization's needs	28.57%	2	14.29%	1	28.57%	2	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	7
4	Getting too many requests from students for engagement opportunities	57.14%	4	28.57%	2	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	7
5	Receiving clear communication from students	14.29%	1	28.57%	2	14.29%	1	28.57%	2	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	7
6	Coordinating the scheduling needs of the students with the organization's timeline	14.29%	1	57.14%	4	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	7
7	Keeping students interested in my organization's work	42.86%	3	28.57%	2	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	14.29%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	7

Question 4. Thinking about the work your organization has accomplished over the past 3 years, how important was the student engagement from ISU in getting this work accomplished?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Not Very Important (1)	0.00%	0
2	2	0.00%	0
3	3	0.00%	0
4	4	14.29%	1
5	5	14.29%	1
6	6	28.57%	2
7	Very Important (7)	42.86%	3
	Total	100%	7

Appendix 4 – ScoutReach Program Evaluation

Program Title	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The Scouts enjoyed the program.					
All Scouts were engaged and participated in the program.					
Scouts were introduced to new ideas or interests.					
The program was age appropriate.					
All materials/supplies were relevant and useful for delivering the program.					
The written program plan in the binder was clear.					

Did any activity go very well/not so well/not as well as you expected?

Did the program fit the allotted time well? Was it too short or too long?

Other Comments: