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Project-based Pedagogy: The Client's Perspective

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Abstract

Project-based experiential business education seeks to provide students with lessons that are meaningful, practical, and enduring. While previous research has sought to understand how students and faculty members react to such educational experiences, it is also important to understand the perceptions of the business clients who engage with programs employing project-based education. The aim of this study was to better understand the experiences of business clients with whom students engaged as part of an undergraduate business capstone course.

Two hundred fifty-three previous clients were surveyed with a 22.4% response rate. Responses were subjected to content analysis to cluster replies into representative themes, which were subsequently checked by comparison with responses from a focus group comprised of five of the original respondents. Sentiment analysis was then utilized to compare the prevalence of positive and negative statements associated with the themes. Responses related to working with the students and student learning were substantially positive (89% and 73% of statements, respectively). Student contributions were positively noted by many clients, with 86% reporting that changes were made based upon student recommendations. Seventy-seven percent reported that student engagement resulted in value creation for the client's organization. Notably, 71% of the clients reported long-term, positive impact from the engagement with the students. These responses indicate that the business clients perceive engagement with students in project-based experiential learning to have substantial value. When coupled with previous research, these results suggest a mutually beneficial experience for the clients, students, and faculty for project-based, experiential learning.

Keywords: Experiential learning, project-based pedagogy, qualitative survey, sentiment analysis

Introduction

Experiential, project-based pedagogy with industry clients provides practical experience for students and an opportunity to apply classroom knowledge and skills to real-world projects (Garrido-Lopez et al., 2018). It is widely endorsed as an effective approach for enhancing the understanding of theory, increasing critical thinking skills, and preparing students for future roles as contributing employees (Canziani & Tullar, 2017; George, 2015). To build a sustainable project-based pedagogy, a mutually beneficial partnership with students, faculty, business clients, and the educational institution is necessary (Garrido-Lopez, et al., 2018). Several studies have investigated students' reflections on their applied pedagogical experiences (Thompson & Edwards, 2009; Gaumer et al., 2012). However, few studies have explored the experiences of clients in these collaborations. The aim of this research is to better understand the perceptions of the business clients involved in student experiential learning projects. Were their experiences positive or negative? Did clients find value in the projects? What recommendations might they have for improving the program?

The researchers conducted a qualitative investigation of the perceptions of clients who participated in a capstone program at a regional US university over a six-year period. The capstone program is required of senior students in the college of business. The intention of the course is to provide students with a work-like experience requiring skills in research, teamwork, project management, customer management, business report writing, and formal presentations. Projects typically are preparation of strategic plans, marketing plans, or marketing research. Prospective clients are solicited from local industries and instructors screen the prospective projects for appropriate scope. Students are placed into project teams and assigned to specific client projects. Students meet with their client company and conduct interviews of key personnel to gain familiarity with the business. Research is conducted and portions of the written project report are submitted throughout the semester culminating in a formal presentation of findings and recommendations at the end of the semester.

Two hundred fifty-three industry clients from 2013 – 2019 were contacted in March 2020 and asked to take a survey of open-ended questions about their student project experiences. Fifty-eight clients responded, (22.4%). The survey asked for feedback on seven topics: the client's overall experience in working with students, how value was created for their organization, their perceptions of the students' learning experience, the types of changes implemented because of the program, recommendations for the types of businesses to solicit as future clients, the long-term impact of the project, and any additional comments that clients wished to share.

Following coding of the survey responses, a focus group of survey participants was conducted as a form of method triangulation to confirm the analysis of the survey results. Sentiment analysis was also performed of the survey responses to identify and categorize the opinions expressed in the survey and to determine whether the client's experience was positive or negative.

Literature Review

According to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), experiential learning is “a business curriculum-related endeavor which is interactive (other than between teacher and pupil) and is characterized by variability and uncertainty” (Gentry, 1990, p. 10). This presence of variability and uncertainty more closely approximates an actual business environment than a traditional classroom and is invaluable in helping students grasp the real-time challenges that organizations face in today’s complex business environment. Ash & Clayton (2009) emphasized that learning is “maximized when it is active, engaged, and collaborative” (p. 25); and it appears helpful that students learn in unfamiliar environments and interact with diverse audiences and situations. In an editorial for the May/June 2019 issue of *BizEd* (renamed *AACSB Insights* in January 2021), the membership journal for AACSB International, Shinn noted that experiential learning is a valuable component of a meaningful business education because it gives students the opportunity to signal that they have gone beyond mere academic exposure, “they have experience—they’ve done the work” (2019, p. 6). In a search of ways to meaningfully engage and prepare students for the business in which they are seeking or advancing their employment, business schools are rapidly increasing the experiential learning opportunities that they offer students (Laufer et al., 2018).

Along with the teamwork requirement of many capstone programs, experiential learning provides the opportunity for students to develop hard and soft skills and can foster behavior modification in students (Childers et al., 2020; George, 2015). Canziani and Tullar (2017) pointed out that project-based, experiential curriculum helps students develop critical thinking skills through the consulting opportunities. Dekkers et al., (2014) highlighted that project-based learning provides students the opportunity to link concepts taught in the classroom to real world applications and challenges. Also, partnering with industry and small business clients for project work has been shown to acclimate students to the reality and expectations of a post-graduation professional world (Kramer-Simpson et al., 2015). Increasingly, project-based learning has become central to assessment of meaningful educational outcomes associated with professional success, a realm where meaningful work more accurately portrays success than might other venues within the typical educational environment (Laufer et al., 2018).

A key concern of maintaining project-based curricula is designing effective and sustainable university and community partnerships (Kenworthy-U’Ren & U’Ren, 2008). The shared benefits to the participants and the co-creation of value are important in enabling these experiential programs to be sustainable (Hillon et al., 2015). The sharing of benefits should include “the client, the student team, the student, and the instructor” (Cook & Belliveau, 2005, p.7).

Service-learning is considered a form of experiential learning that has been growing in popularity among many disciplines in higher education including business schools. Research generally agrees that there are some specific course objectives/outcomes that need to be incorporated within the curriculum for a course to be considered to incorporate service-learning. While service-learning projects are not necessarily substantially different from experiential learning projects, the term service-learning has come to be associated with projects that generate social value to the community at large (Block &

Bartrus, 2018; Roland, 2008) and the students should deepen their understanding of the social issue addressed with an individual reflective component (Block & Bartrus, 2018; Yorio & Ye, 2012). In the United States, a more formal definition was stated as part of the National and Community Service Act. This 1990 definition further clarified that service-learning has four components: 1) students actively participate in organized service experiences that meet actual community needs 2) experiences are integrated into academic curriculum, 3) skills and knowledge applied to real-life situations in the community and 4) the experiences foster the development of a sense of caring (Cohen, 1994; Godfrey & Grasso, 2000).

Taking these specific criteria and guidelines into consideration, the outcome of consulting with existing or start-up businesses is designed to benefit the business entity and does not necessarily enhance, solve, or alleviate a community's social issue. While some of the broader goals of service-learning may be recognized, the specific projects incorporated into the capstone course are intended to provide the students with understanding of the realities of work in a managerial setting while meaningfully contributing to business success. These goals are well aligned with consideration as an experiential learning project and is how the authors will characterize the projects associated with the current study.

Much of prior research has focused on either the professors' or students' self-reported experiences in experiential programs (Kraft & Goodell, 1991; Gray et al., 2013). Thus, a study from the clients' point of view may contribute to the body of knowledge regarding successful applied pedagogy with industry clients (Craig, 1999).

Methods

As an initial study with a focus on client perceptions, the researchers employed a grounded approach toward understanding the clients' perspectives on the experiential learning projects (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This type of qualitative research involves the collecting and analyzing of non-numerical data. By using various methodologies to collect data from open-ended responses, researchers heighten the exploratory capabilities of their research studies (Alase, 2017). The key is to find a qualitative methodology that "is flexible enough and participant-oriented enough to get to the real live experiences of the research participants" (Alase, 2017, p. 9).

In this investigation, clients who participated in a College of Business capstone program over a six-year period were solicited to take a qualitative survey of open-ended questions regarding their experiences with the student projects. The survey asked for feedback on seven topics: the client's overall experience in working with students, how value was created for their organization, their perceptions of the students' learning experience, the types of changes implemented because of the program, recommendations for the types of businesses to solicit as future clients, the long-term impact of the project, and additional comments.

The survey instrument is presented in Appendix 1. Two hundred fifty-three industry clients from 2013 – 2019 were contacted in March 2020 by email with a link to a Qualtrics survey in a study approved by the institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Fifty-eight clients responded, (22.4%). Respondents'

survey answers were varied in length. A few responded with several sentences or paragraphs. Other responses were brief.

Over a four-week period in March and April 2019, the qualitative data for the 58 respondents were collected in a Qualtrics comma-separated values (CSV) file and downloaded for assessment. Four researchers conducted content analysis of these data including coding to analyze the responses. This iterative process, including discussions by the researchers, led to key themes emerging that provided insight into the respondents' experiences with the student projects.

After the coding of the data, the researchers utilized an on-line focus group as an integrity check (method triangulation) to the survey analysis (Patton, 1999). Five survey respondents were picked at random and participated via Zoom in a focus group led by a trained moderator using three questions from the open-ended survey. Archibald et al., (2019) posited that Zoom Conferencing was an effective means of conducting qualitative research relative to other processes including in-person or telephone interviews. This virtual focus group process followed a standard, four-step nominal group technique. A question was posed, and the participants were given time to silently record their respective thoughts. Participants then silently ranked their responses and shared their top ranked response with the group and moderator. After recording, each of the five participants' responses was discussed for clarification. Following the discussion, each participant was asked to silently consider the group's responses and to rank them. Participants were allotted six points and instructed to assign three points to the most important response, two points to the second most important, and one point to the third most important.

Next, sentiment analysis was performed to identify and categorize the opinions expressed in the survey to determine whether the client's experience was positive or negative. Sentiment analysis or opinion mining analyzes sentiments and emotions expressed in written text (Liu, 2020). Sentiment analysis has been utilized to discern consumer opinions in various industries, including health care, hospitality, and consumer products (Liu, 2020). The specific approach for this analysis reduced the comments to individual words after pre-processing the text by replacing contractions and removing stop and undesirable words. Since the text is considered an arrangement of individual words, the sentiment of the text can be regarded as the aggregate of the sentiments for the individual words comprising a textual statement (Silge & Robinson, 2017). The "Bing" lexicon, which categorizes words into positive and negative categories, was applied using R software. The Bing lexicon, developed by Mingqing Hu and Bing Liu (Silge & Robinson, 2017), contains 6,789 words, 2,006 words were categorized as positive, and the remaining 4,783 words were categorized as negative (Naldi, 2019).

Results

Survey responses for the 58 completed surveys were coded by the researchers and tabulated. The coding exercise revealed 31 themes for the seven survey questions as presented in Table 1 along with the frequency and percentage of the responses.

Table 1
Coding Results – Client Survey responses

Question	Themes	Frequency of Response	% of Response
Q1. Please describe your overall experience working with the students.	Project was helpful	14	23%
	Students brought insight/new knowledge	13	22%
	Students were professional	10	17%
	Project was not helpful	8	13%
	Interesting / enthusiastic experience	7	12%
	Students were thorough / diligent	5	8%
	Students made minimal effort	3	5%
Q2. Based on your interaction with the students, how do you feel about their overall learning experience?	Valuable learning experience	24	62%
	Poor learning experience	4	11%
	Students highly engaged	4	11%
	Mixed / mediocre learning experience	3	8%
	Students had a challenging experience	3	8%
Q3. Based on the students' recommendations, what types of changes did you make in the next few months following the completion of the project?	Marketing and / or social media	20	56%
	None	5	14%
	Changes in layout or equipment	4	11%
	Unspecified changes made	4	11%
	Changes in pricing	3	8%
Q4. From your perspective, how was value created for your organization through this collaboration?	New knowledge and insight	19	43%
	Better marketing	14	32%
	No value	5	11%
	Encouragement and inspiration	4	9%
	Enthusiasm	2	5%
Q5. What was the overall impact (i.e., longer term) that this collaboration had on your organization?	More social media and / or marketing	8	23%
	None	8	23%
	Unspecified benefits	6	17%
	Changes in long-term strategy	6	17%
	Better business results	5	14%
	Increased networking	1	3%
	Changes in physical layout	1	3%
Q6. Based on your experience with the WCU Capstone Program, what types of organizations would you recommend this experience to?	Small businesses in general	12	32%
	Nonprofits	8	22%
	Any business	7	19%
	Start-ups	5	14%
	None	3	8%
	Orgs that wish to help students	2	5%
Q7. Other comments?	Positive expressions of appreciation	13	54%
	Recommended changes in program structure	5	21%
	Program is helpful, valuable	4	17%
	Program was a bad experience for client	2	8%

Results from the three questions asked of the Focus Group are presented in Table 2 and compared with the coded responses from those same questions asked in the survey (Questions 1, 4, and 7). The comparison yielded a robust alignment between the survey results and the focus group results (see Match/Alignment column of Table 2).

Table 2
Comparison of Coded Survey Themes (Column 4) to Focus Group Responses (Column 7)

Question	Themes from Survey	Frequency of Response	% of Responses	Focus Group Responses	Frequency of Response	% of Responses	Match / Alignment
Q1. Please describe your overall experience working with the students.	1. Project was helpful	14	23%	Students brought Innovation	10	39%	#2
	2. Students brought insight/new knowledge	13	22%	Students added business knowledge	8	32%	#6
	3. Students were professional	10	17%	Misunderstood market segment	4	15%	#4
	4. Project was not helpful	8	13%	Made client aware of technology	3	12%	#2
	5. Interesting / enthusiastic experience	7	12%	Poor alignment of research with client's business	1	4%	#7
	6. Students were thorough / diligent	5	8%				
	7. Students made minimal effort	3	5%				
Q4. From your perspective, how was value created for your organization?	1. New knowledge and insight	19	43%	New knowledge; fresh perspective	13	52%	#1
	2. Better marketing ideas / strategy	14	32%	More aware of the niche market	5	20%	#2
	3. No value	5	11%	Marketing; social media	5	24%	#2
	4. Encouragement and inspiration	4	9%	Identified new strategy	6	4%	#2
	5. Enthusiasm	2	5%				
Q7. What else should the professors know?	1. Clients expressed gratitude	13	54%	Students were professional	2	33%	No match
	2. Suggested changes to the program	5	21%	Suggested changes - need more follow-up	2	33%	#2
	3. Found program helpful / valuable	4	17%	Varied experience & results	2	33%	#3/#4
	4. Reported bad experience	2	8%				

The sentiment analysis was utilized to determine the valence, positive or negative, of the survey responses provided by the business partners. Sentiment analysis or opinion mining analyzes sentiments and emotions expressed in written text (Liu, 2020). Analysis results in Figure 1 show the number of positive and negative words that the clients expressed in their comments for each of the survey questions. The responses were substantially positive, with the margin of positive words relative to the negative words ranging from a maximum of 58 words (Question 1, 89% positive) to a minimum of 12 words (Questions 3 and 5, 71% positive).

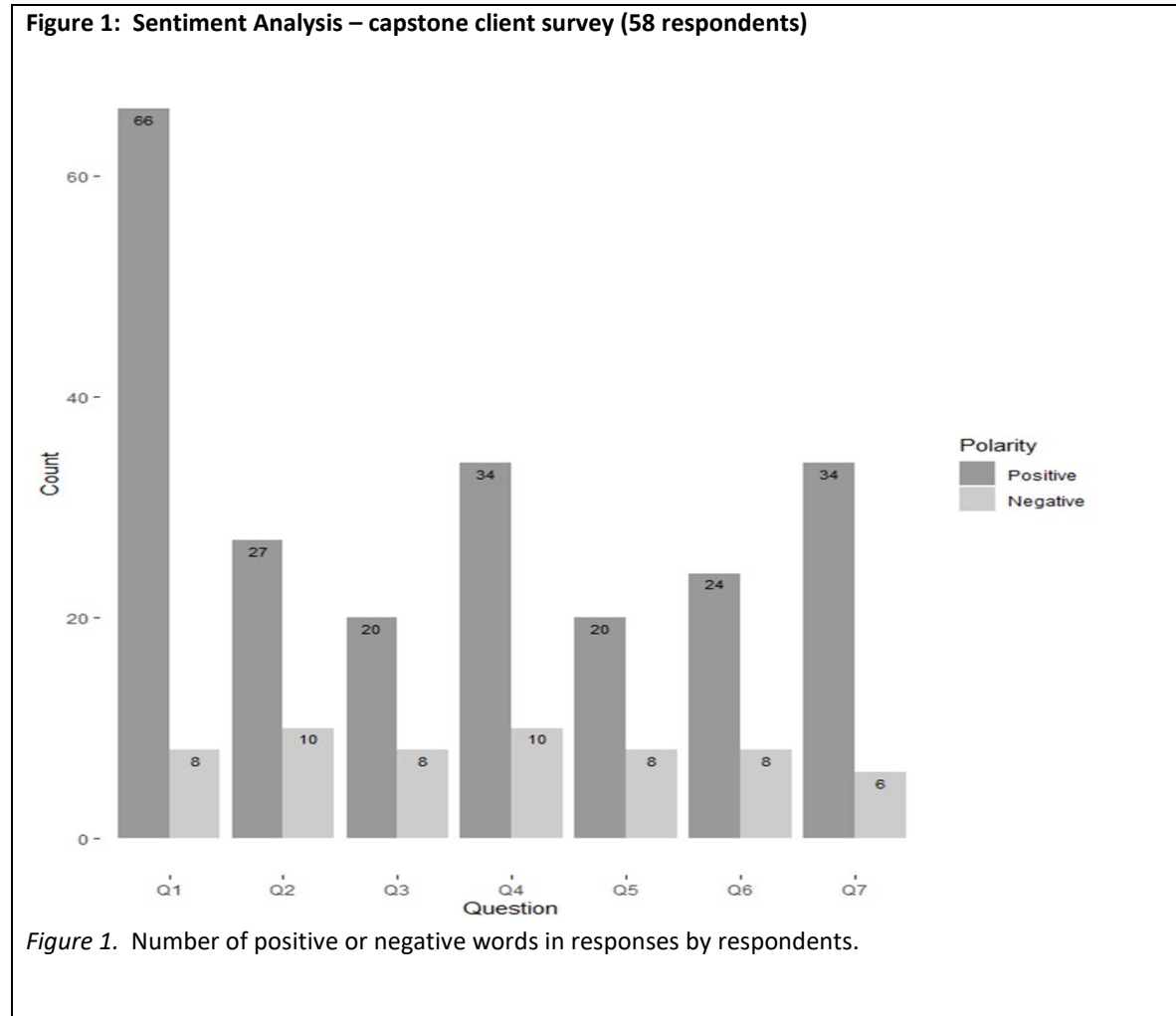


Table 3 provides a summary of the coded survey responses along with the associated sentiment analysis. For survey Question 1, respondents were overwhelmingly positive, with 89% positive in describing their overall experience of working with the students as measured by the sentiment analysis. Twenty-three percent of survey respondents found the projects helpful, 22% stated that the students

brought insight or new knowledge, and 17% stated that students displayed professional behavior. Only 13% found the project unhelpful.

Table 3
Summary of Survey and Sentiment Analyses

Question	Themes	% of Response	% of Positive Exp	% of Negative Exp
Q1. Please describe your overall experience working with the students.	Project was helpful	23%	89%	11%
	Students brought insight/new knowledge	22%		
	Students were professional	17%		
	Project was not helpful	13%		
	Interesting / enthusiastic experience	12%		
	Students were thorough / diligent	8%		
	Students made minimal effort	5%		
Q2. Based on your interaction with the students, how do you feel about their overall learning experience?	Valuable learning experience	62%	73%	27%
	Poor learning experience	11%		
	Students highly engaged	11%		
	Mixed / mediocre learning experience	8%		
	Students had a challenging experience	8%		
Q3. Based on the students' recommendations, what types of changes did you make in the next few months following the completion of the project?	Marketing and / or social media	56%	71%	29%
	None	14%		
	Changes in layout or equipment	11%		
	Unspecified changes made	11%		
	Changes in pricing	8%		
Q4. From your perspective, how was value created for your organization through this collaboration?	New knowledge and insight	43%	77%	23%
	Better marketing	32%		
	No value	11%		
	Encouragement and inspiration	9%		
	Enthusiasm	5%		
Q5. What was the overall impact (i.e., longer term) that this collaboration had on your organization?	More social media and / or marketing	23%	71%	29%
	None	23%		
	Unspecified benefits	17%		
	Changes in long-term strategy	17%		
	Better business results	14%		
	Increased networking	3%		
	Changes in physical layout	3%		
Q6. Based on your experience with the WCU Capstone Program, what types of organizations would you recommend this experience to?	Small businesses in general	32%	75%	25%
	Nonprofits	22%		
	Any business	19%		
	Start-ups	14%		
	None	8%		
	Orgs that wish to help students	5%		
Q7. Other comments?	Positive expressions of appreciation	54%	85%	15%
	Recommended changes in program structure	21%		
	Program is helpful, valuable	17%		
	Program was a bad experience for client	8%		

Question 2 asked clients how they felt about the students' overall learning experience. Seventy-three percent of their remarks were positive as measured by the sentiment analysis. Sixty-two percent of survey respondents called it a valuable learning experience. Question 3 inquired about the types of changes the clients made following completion of the project. Seventy-one percent replied with positive remarks with 56% of survey respondents indicating that changes were made to social media or marketing. Question 4 asked how value was created for the client's organization. Seventy-seven percent reported a positive experience with 43% of survey respondents indicating that new knowledge and insight were gained and 32% specifying better marketing. For Question 5, which asked about the longer-term impact of the project on the firm, 71% of respondents' remarks were positive. Twenty-three percent of the clients specified more social media because of the project while 23% reported no long-term impact. An additional 17% reported unspecified benefits and another 17% indicated changes in long-term strategy. Question 6 asked what types of organizations the clients would recommend for the capstone program. Seventy-five percent of the responses were classified as positive remarks. Thirty-two percent of survey respondents suggested small businesses, 22% recommended non-profits, and 19% replied that any business would benefit. Question 7, the final question, was non-specific and simply asked for other comments. Eighty-five percent of the replies were positive. Fifty-four percent of respondents expressed gratitude for the experience while 21% made recommendations for changes to the program.

Discussion and Implications

The results clearly indicate that the business partners who provide experiences in which our students can engage find the arrangement satisfying, overwhelmingly reporting positive regard for the students with whom they worked. Further, the businesses felt that students had positive learning experiences, a measure of which student engagement was reported in most cases. In accordance with earlier research, these findings comport with earlier reports of student benefits, and represent an understanding by the businesses of the importance of student benefits in the arrangement.

Further, the businesses reported clear benefits for their organizations. The substantial majority describe business changes made based upon suggestions made by the students, and many reported the creation of value for their businesses and positive organizational impacts. Perhaps most telling was that the vast majority (91%) of respondents provided suggestions for a wide variety of other organizations that could receive benefit from the program. This is a clear indication of the recognition that the respondents have for the business value present in collaborating with the university to provide mutually beneficial experiential learning opportunities for business students.

These results clearly bolster the argument that the students involved in these experiences have gone well beyond just traditional academic exposure, such that "they have experience—they've done the work" (Shinn, 2019, p. 6). There can be little doubt that experiential components to business education benefit the students, and the institutions as they pursue their educational mission (Kraft & Goodell, 1991; Thompson & Edwards, 2009; Gaumer et al., 2012; Maaravi, et al., 2021.), although these experiences must be well designed and meaningful if they are to garner student satisfaction (Childers et al., 2020). In particular, the students must feel that they are doing meaningful work and not just

providing free labor (Maaravi, et al., 2021). The results of this study support the presence of business meaning as part of the lesson based upon rendering business value for the organizations involved. Indeed, in the managerial environment, such value is typically the hallmark of success.

However, for appropriate experiences to be made available to students, business schools must be able to find originations that are willing to provide meaningful opportunities, and work with students and the business school to ensure relevancy. Mutual benefits are necessary, and for partner businesses, this means that the business must perceive that they not only contributed to the education of students, but also felt that the experiences satisfy the needs of the businesses. An exchange of positive regard results from assessments of meaningful contribution by both parties. By directly seeking information from the business organizations who have partnered in providing experiential learning opportunities, this study provides valuable insights into the perceptions of these partner organizations.

To the extent that well-designed collaborative business education projects engender satisfaction, value, and appreciation from business partners, this may also support collaboration on other fronts. It is well understood that in the United States, there is a substantial impending decline in people of the typical college student age. As it becomes more competitive to recruit students, colleges and universities will need to develop innovative ways to attract students (Grawe, 2018; McGee, 2015). A record of collaborative educational project success may provide for willingness among businesses to contribute their efforts to such activities as recruitment fairs. Such a record also provides a good message about the practical nature of the business education offered by the school.

This study utilized qualitative methods to collect and analyze information about the perceptions of clients in a university capstone program. The exploratory nature of the study made a qualitative approach to the research appropriate, and the results may provide guidance for future quantitative research (Sofaer, 1999). This study utilized several different qualitative methods (open-ended survey questions, focus group, and sentiment analysis) as a form of method triangulation concerning the same phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2012). Each provided a different perspective on the research topic. No one method proved superior to the others but rather the approaches were complimentary (Kaplowitz & Hoehn, 2001). Likewise, participation in the coding process and focus group analyses by multiple researchers served as a form of investigator triangulation bringing different perspectives to the evaluation of data which also helped to confirm the findings (Denzin, 1978).

Future research can expand understanding of the exchange of benefits in project-based experiential learning by correlating the impressions of the various stakeholders. In such a research project, the themes developed as part of this research can be utilized to develop a survey with Likert-type scales that provide quantitative data. Further, this study was completed in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. There can be little doubt that the pandemic has impacted all activities, and it has prompted reconceptualization of the ways in which we conduct project-based business education (c.f., Allen, 2020; Laufer et al., 2020; Pivoting in a Pandemic, 2020). Of particular interest are projects that might be focused on helping small businesses adapt to the new business environment. For example, Johns Hopkins University developed a COVID Response Team as part of a strategic consulting practicum where students consulted with small businesses to help the businesses find ways that they pivot their business models during the pandemic. The Johns Hopkins innovation was the curriculum content winner for the

2020 Fast Track Curriculum Innovation Award (Pivoting in a Pandemic, 2020). Changes arising out of adapting to the new business realities can readily be subject to evaluation in much the same way that this study approached perceptions of the value rendered by existing business consulting projects.

For a sustainable program of project-based curricula, there must be mutual benefits for all parties involved: students, faculty, educational institutions, industry liaisons, and local business clients (Garrido-Lopez, et al., 2018). As previously noted, considerable research highlights the benefits to students of project-based pedagogy as well as that of the institutions involved. This study focused primarily upon the perceptions of the business clients in order to close the missing link on participant perspectives.

Conclusion

The positive experiences reported by clients, when coupled with prior research, indicate that there are substantial mutual benefits to all parties that can be obtained through project-based pedagogy. Emphasizing the nature of mutual gains can be utilized to ensure the sustainability of experiential, project-based pedagogy with industry clients. Anecdotally, this matches the experiences of the researchers who have had little difficulty in recruiting clients for an experiential learning, capstone program at a regional US university over the past ten years. Project-based, experiential programs appear to be beneficial to all participants including the clients who provide the projects, enhancing the vitality of both educational experiences and the business community. As such, this pedagogy should be promoted by business educators as an important approach to student learning, regional engagement, and economic development. Recognition and communication of the fact that community partners also receive value should be seen as a critical element in keeping such programs sustainable.

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Appendix

College of Business Capstone Client Post Project Reflection Survey

Please Click the Arrow Below to Begin the 10-Question Survey

A1 Name of the Organization:

A2 Your Name & Position within the Organization:

Name: (1) _____

Position: (2) _____

A3 When did you collaborate in a learning project with WCU College of Business Capstone class?

▼ 2019 ... 2008

Q1 Please describe your overall experience working with the students.

Q2 Based on your interaction with the students, how do you feel about their overall learning experience?

Q3 Based on the students' recommendations, what types of changes did you make in the next few months following the completion of the project?

Q4 From your perspective, how was value created for your organization through this collaboration?

Q5 What was the overall impact (i.e., longer term) that this collaboration had on your organization?

Q6 Based on your experience with the WCU Capstone Program, what types of organizations would you recommend this experience to?

Q7 Additional Comments: