

Incorporating Community-Based Learning in a Course on the Economics of Poverty

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Abstract:

Community based learning (CBL) is an integrative pedagogical technique that connects classroom work with meaningful community involvement and exchange. Community organizations and students mutually benefit from the CBL experience both by meeting course objectives and addressing community-identified goals. Importantly, CBL is a type of experiential learning; it is not community service nor is it an internship. In this paper, we will discuss how we have incorporated a community based research project into a course on the Economics of Poverty in which groups of students work with local non-profit agencies on academic projects during the semester. In addition to providing advice on how to create and manage CBL projects, the paper includes a thorough cost-benefit analysis of this pedagogical approach, including detailed student feedback that suggests that the CBL experience enhanced their learning.

Key Words: Economic Education, Pedagogy, Community Based Learning, Poverty

JEL Classification: A22, I32

I. Introduction

In recent years, there have been several initiatives within the Economics profession to encourage faculty to engage their students through interactive learning techniques (Starting Point¹; Salemi and Walstad, 2010; Hoyt and McGoldrick, 2012). Many of these teaching innovations have been in practice for a while and are widely implemented (such as the use of classroom experiments), but several other techniques, such as activities that engage local communities, are somewhat rare to find in the undergraduate Economics curriculum. In this paper, we introduce a community-based learning (CBL) project that is a central component to an undergraduate course on the Economics of U.S. Poverty. We document how the project is much more than community service – it is a research project where students worked with local nonprofit organizations to apply the skills and concepts from class to a real world setting that helped the organization achieve its goals. We describe how to effectively develop a meaningful CBL component into an Economics course by designing it to achieve a specific set of goals, while managing the expectations of both the students and the community partners. Lastly, we discuss the goals of the CBL project, describe how we assessed those goals and document that we successfully achieved these goals.

Ziegert and McGoldrick (2008) discuss how connecting coursework to local communities promotes deep learning. As they state: “A deep approach to learning, or learning for understanding, necessitates critical thinking skills, integration of knowledge over time and subjects, theoretical application to practical situations and higher order skills of analysis and synthesis” (Ziegert and McGoldrick, (2008); p.40). We will document that a well-defined community based research project can push students to use the theory from class to deepen their

¹ <http://serc.carleton.edu/econ/index.html>

understanding of the concepts and help to foster both critical thinking and other life skills, such as effectively communicating (both verbally and in written form) with different audiences. In addition, a CBL project can expand students' perceptions by allowing practitioners to be an integral part in the teaching process. In fact, people who work on these issues on a day-to-day basis (and in our case, work with a specific clientele: low-income households) can provide credibility to classroom discussions that often seem less relevant in a neutral setting such as a university classroom. CBL allows the definition of the classroom to expand into the local community. In addition, using more integrative teaching techniques, such as community based learning, may help to attract more women and minorities in economics who have different learning styles (Bartlett, 1996; Feigenbaum, 2013).

Several papers document how service learning can be effectively introduced into a variety of Economics courses (McGoldrick, 1998; McGoldrick, 2002; McGoldrick, Battle, and Gallagher, 2000; Lopez, 2009). However, the focus of this paper is not service learning; instead we propose a community-based research project as a partnership between students, faculty, and community members to collaboratively engage in a research project in which both the student and the community organization benefit (but in different ways). The literature often views CBL as the umbrella that includes service learning and community-based research (Mooney and Edwards, 2001; Strand et al. 2003; McCallister, 2008). Our goal is to promote CBL as an effective teaching approach in Economics through the use of a community-based research project. Several other fields, and most notably sociology, have effectively introduced community-based research into their curriculum (see Howard (1993) for a review).

Just recently is the concept of community-based learning (CBL) being applied to the Economics curriculum. Smith (2007) describes how a community based research project can be

incorporated into courses in environmental economics and natural resources through the use of multi-day field trips that serve as case studies. Brooks and Schramm (2010) develop a comprehensive, four-semester long project that integrates community-based research by studying the impacts of the University of Vermont on the surrounding community. Our CBL project is quite different from both of these; in our case, the community agencies identify a research need. , We partner them with a small group of students who then gather the relevant information, analyze it and then report back to the community partner (in both written and oral formats).

In what follows, we will define community based learning and its goals. We then fully describe the specific class and the CBL project, and provide detailed instructions about how to effectively manage the project. We also provide specific examples of the projects. Next, we do a thorough cost-benefit analysis of integrating a CBL project into an Economics course and then assess the impact of the project using a detailed student survey. We conclude by suggesting other courses in which CBL projects could be incorporated.

II. Community Based Learning

Community based learning takes many forms, and may consist of service learning, student-based instruction, and community based research projects (or, ‘action research’ as coined in McGoldrick (2002)). While there are many similarities between service learning and community based research projects, there are some important differences between them.

We found that the Center for Social Concern at Johns Hopkins University has a precise definition of CBL that includes key principles: “Community-based learning (CBL) is a pedagogical model that connects classroom-based work with meaningful community involvement and experiences. Within the context of equitable partnership, community

organizations and students mutually benefit from the CBL experience both by meeting *course objectives* and by addressing *community-identified goals*. The principles of CBL include:

- Faculty, students, and community groups collaborate in pursuing community-identified goals and academic course objectives.
- Courses provide relevant reading, research (if applicable), and evaluation, including reflection, and meaningful learning objectives for community work; faculty meet their course objectives by preparing students for community entry, providing meaningful outlets for critical reflection, and adopting methods of rigorous evaluation.
- Assurance that the community benefits from the relationship with the university and the students' community-based project.
- Academic credit is given for classroom *and* community-based learning, demonstrated by the students' preparation for their experiential learning, community service activities, reflection and evaluation. Credits are assigned based on these factors, not on the community engagement by itself.” (Website for Center for Social Concern at Johns Hopkins University)²

This definition is useful for a number of reasons. First, the projects of the CBL are identified by the community groups, and it is important for the community partners to directly benefit from the project. Next, the course prepares students for their CBL experience, monitors progress, and evaluates the academic content of the CBL project. Third, students must receive credit for the learning that takes place as a result of the CBL; not just for the work itself. Thus, the student is held accountable for their work. In light of this definition of CBL, we designed the following four goals for our specific CBL project: To provide students with an interactive learning

² <http://www.jhu.edu/csc/cbl.shtml>. Retrieved on November 12, 2013.

experience outside of the classroom with local practitioners that will deepen their understanding of local poverty issues.

- To develop a project that is mutually beneficial to the nonprofit organization and students via a meaningful educational experience.
- To foster a sense of community between the students, local nonprofit organizations and the university.
- To develop important skills for the student, including leadership skills, written/verbal communication, working with people from diverse backgrounds, and data analysis.

In the discussion that follows, we address how we achieved these goals in designing the CBL projects and measure the extent to which we actually achieved these goals through the use of a comprehensive student survey.

III. Description of Class and CBL Group Project

The Starting Point platform³ recommends the following three-steps for effective service-learning (which we adapt to include CBL): (1) preparing and designing the project, (2) implementing the project, and (3) learning through reflection and assessment. This section will describe the first two steps, while Section V will describe our assessment of the CBL project.

We applied the CBL project to an undergraduate course on the Economics of U.S. Poverty at a small liberal arts college in the Spring semesters of 2012 and 2013. Each semester, there were 24 students in the class, who consisted of primarily sophomores and juniors. The

³ <http://serc.carleton.edu/econ/service/index.html>

course is a 200-level Economics elective that requires only Introductory Economics as a prerequisite. Thus, the course incorporates basic supply and demand theory so is therefore not restricted to Economics majors (although the majority of the students were Economics majors or minors). The class was first developed at this college in 2012, so it was developed with having the community-based learning project as a central part of the class. At this particular college, community-based learning is not a common teaching strategy so that the majority of the students did not have any experience with service learning in their coursework (although three-quarters of them had varying degrees of community service experiences).

The course was organized into two parts: (1) defining and measuring poverty, which included concepts such as unemployment, income inequality, economic mobility, etc.; and (2) analyzing anti-poverty programs, including unemployment insurance, traditional welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, the Earned Income Tax Credit, social security, disability, etc. The course description in the course catalogue stated very clearly that the course will include a significant service learning component, in which students will be required to complete at least 10 hours of field work at a local non-profit organization. It is important to make clear at the onset that students fully understand that the CBL project was a central component to the class. In fact, the time that students spent at their community partners was built directly into the class time; for example, the class met each week on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, but their five weeks of on-site partner work was during the Tuesday morning class period. Using class time helps to minimize the amount of conflicts students may have with setting up meeting times with their community partners. It also signals to students that the time spent at their community organization is in fact class time and that they should use the time as such. It may help to describe the part of the CBL project that is spent off-site as a mini-internship built directly into

the course. However, different from many internship experiences, students are required to complete a research project for their community partner, and much of the work for their project is done in their own time (i.e., outside of class time). The time spent at the community organization should be devoted to learning about their services and the structure of their organization, and to collect specific information from the staff about their project. Often, this involves many informal interviews administered by the students to the people who work for the non-profit organization.

Each class of 24 students was divided into six groups of four since six community partners were identified prior to the start of the semester. Of course, the size of the project could be easily scaled up or down, depending on the class size. We have found that groups of three or four seem to work best to maximize participation among all group members, and think it is best to select the groups based on student preferences. Each student was asked to research each community partner early in the semester, and then rank order their preferences of organizations they would like to work with. Based on these orderings and the availability of student vehicles, groups were assigned. (The college is located in a rural location, and most of the community organizations were far enough that students had to travel in groups. If this were done in an urban setting, public transportation may minimize this issue.) We envision that a set of CBL projects could be effectively introduced into classes of 10-60 students. Anything larger than 60 would be difficult for the instructor to manage, unless other staff members are involved with the placement and follow-up of the groups.

Before the semester began, the community partners were found using both personal connections that the faculty member had and through the use of the college's center for volunteerism. In fact, using well-established connections is one of the most important features of

a well-defined CBL project. Many colleges and universities have offices and centers devoted to these types of activities so we highly recommend starting there to find community partners. All of the community partners were contacted prior to the start of the semester and were fully involved with the development of projects that served their needs. In fact, for most of the projects, the faculty member worked directly with the community partner to develop the specific topic prior to the start of the course. In a few cases, the community partner preferred to work with their group of students to narrow down the specific topic by providing them with a few options. Both methods worked well and the faculty member should have the community partner decide which is best for their situation. Overall, however, it was emphasized that the projects should be something that is useful to the community partner – that the goal is to have the students produce something tangible that would be utilized by the partner in some way, whether the information was used in a grant application or reported to their board members as a start of the implementation process, for example. As part of the project, students were asked to recommend how the project should be implemented at each organization.

A short description of the graded component of the CBL project was included on the course syllabus and then a more thorough description was provided to the students early in the semester, which can be found in Appendix A. For the final report, the students were required to present their work to the class and their community partners, and to complete a written report. A complete checklist of tasks for the instructor is included in Appendix B, as a way to organize the CBL project. Students were required to produce weekly log reports (included in Appendix C) so that progress could be monitored and problems caught early on. Several issues were brought to our attention through the use of the weekly reporting system, so we highly recommend using them.

A critical component of a successful CBL project is clearly communicating expectations early and often. It is best to start the semester off by detailing the CBL project and your expectations, and be sure to mention that the students are not only representing themselves and their group, but also you (the instructor) and the institution. In addition, make it clear that their project entails serious academic coursework, that it is up to the student to responsibly communicate with their community partner, and that there is a strict attendance policy for their sessions off-site (e.g., for each site visit missed, their final grade will be reduced by one percentage point). These points should be reiterated as they begin their work with the community partner and throughout their time off-site. In addition, it is best to clarify your expectations of the students with the community partners, and to inform the students that their partner may have slightly different expectations. It is our experience that community partners often have slightly lower expectations than the instructor; they are often too forgiving of the students (for example, if they miss a session on-site). However, it is best to clarify that students must abide by the instructor's policies to avoid any confusion.

As with any group work that constitutes a significant portion of their grade, it is essential to have equal participation among all group members. In order to motivate students, we administered peer evaluations at the mid-point of the semester and at the end of the semester (provided in Appendix D). The timing of the peer evaluations serves different purposes; the mid-term evaluation helps to identify problems so that the faculty member can reach out to the group members and rectify the problem in the midst of the project. The final evaluation is meant as a grading device; the grades for individual students on the group project will be adjusted accordingly, to reflect what their peers thought about each person's work. Each of these peer

evaluations should minimize problems with group dynamics and shirking. However, the instructor should be prepared to intervene with the groups at any point of the process.

As for the final project, the faculty member should work with each group to make sure the final product is high quality. Small group meetings can be held a few weeks before the final project is due. In Spring 2013, each group was scheduled to present their Powerpoint presentation in advance of the final deadline for the written report; when feasible, the presentation was made at the community organization so that the staff and sometimes board members can participate and provide feedback. When this was not feasible (given space or time), we invited the community partners to campus to participate in the presentations. Either way, all students in the class were expected to attend each other's presentations so that they gain an understanding of the various services that non-profit organizations in the community offer and for them to compare the issues that each organization faces in alleviating poverty. In fact, in each semester, there were common themes that emerged in the six groups that we were able to discuss in class after the presentations (e.g., for Spring 2012, issues around food insecurity emerged which then nicely complemented the other topics in class). Students were deeply engaged in these conversations because they witnessed the issues firsthand at their local community organization and could speak in a meaningful way about problems and stereotypes faced when trying to alleviate poverty.

Having the community partner provide specific feedback on each of the projects is incredibly helpful to the instructor to gauge the usefulness and applicability of the project to their needs. The questions and comments that the students received during the presentation should be incorporated into the final draft; that is, students should adjust their analysis accordingly to address as many of their concerns as possible. In addition, the instructor can read and grade a

draft of each group’s written report to ensure that they meet the instructor’s expectations, especially since the quality of the projects is a reflection (to some extent) of instructor involvement. In fact, when recruiting community partners to participate in the CBL project, it may be useful to market your involvement as a way of ensuring that the project will be productive, high-quality and useful for them. We have found that community partners respond positively to knowing that the instructor is playing an important role in the development and completion of the project.

Below is a brief description of the projects from the two semesters. As you can see, there was enough variation in the topics of the projects so that students in different groups could educate their peers about the various issues they were grappling with throughout the semester. In addition, the majority of the projects required some data analysis, typically through the use of spreadsheets. This list is meant to provide ideas on the types of projects that students could do in a class on poverty. However, we believe there are a wide range of suitable CBL projects for many other types of Economics courses.

Table 1. Topics of Group Projects

Title of Project	Description
Landlord Booklet	Develop a booklet that can be used to recruit and inform landlords for families who qualified for subsidized housing.
Economic Impact Study	Do an economic impact study for a non-profit organization in the county.
Digitization of Client Data	Digitize client data for a local nonprofit so that the results can be used in grants.
Trends in Food Bank Usage	Analyze the trends in the usage patterns of food bank clients and track the prices of those goods over time.
A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Long Term Care	Analyze various long-term care options in the county for the retired population.
Website Development	Develop a website for a local nonprofit organization that had no previous web

	presence.
Health Clinic Data	Record and analyze data for clients of a local free healthcare clinic.
Food Stamp Eligibility Initiative	Determine how many food bank clients are eligible for food stamps, and develop marketing materials for food stamp enrollment.
myBenefits Kiosk	Develop marketing materials for a kiosk at a local organization that allows clients to electronically sign up for benefits.
Double-Dipping in Food Pantries	Analyze the extent to which double-dipping occurs in local food pantry.
Community Assessment of Head Start	Determine the needs for Head Start in the county.
Modernizing Employment Tracking	Develop database of employment training and outcomes for clientele of workforce development project.

IV. Costs and Benefits of CBL Project

Clearly, introducing a significant project into any class, and especially one that uses precious class time comes with some costs. However, we believe the benefits of a community-based learning project outweigh its costs. In what follows, we detail some of the explicit and implicit costs of incorporating a CBL project into an Economics course, and suggest ways to minimize these costs. Then, we will discuss some of the benefits of a CBL project. Table 2 provides a summary of what we feel are the most significant costs and benefits of a comprehensive CBL project.

The most significant cost of a project like this is class time. As we developed the CBL project, we felt it was important to use class time rather than require it outside of class. This makes it clear to the students that the time spent at their partner organizations is very important and of high value, and they should spend the time as such. It also minimizes conflicts with students who may not be able to find a time each week to go to the site as a group. In our course design, we used five class periods to visit sites in small groups, and then dedicated three other

class periods to the group presentations and class site visits. Thus, a significant amount of traditional course content is lost. However, we would argue that traditional content is replaced with different types of content, in that each group of students are learning about different ideas, practices and struggles, and are working to create original solutions to the problems they face. Relatedly, it is important to make sure the CBL project is academic in nature. It is best to reiterate this to the community partners and provide them with specific examples of possible projects. This helps to ensure that students are not merely “stacking shelves” but are engaging in issues that the nonprofit organizations are facing. Differentiating between community service and a community based research project is important to do with both your students and the community partners.

As discussed in Lopez (2009), the other most significant cost involves finding community partners, developing a relationship with them and providing the students feedback on their projects. As discussed above, it may be wise to start with offices on your campuses that have already developed relationships with local community partners. We have found that they understand local organizations quite well, know the personalities involved, and are a great resource in both establishing the connection and working with them on the development of the projects. In fact, they may already understand some of the challenges these organizations face, and may even be a starting point in developing projects for each organization. In addition, some campuses have dedicated staff that can facilitate the entire project, should you desire. In our case, we used some of our own personal connections and then supplemented them with connections that the center for volunteerism had to partner with six different organizations in the area. In a more urban setting, this could be more daunting, as there are more options available so using pre-established connections may be the right course of action. It is also possible that some

of the nonprofits are already engaged with a local university and may not be able to accommodate a CBL project, as discussed in Littlepage et al. (2012). In addition, the instructor must realize that the local organization has to dedicate precious staff time to oversee the student project. This is a significant cost for the organization so it is important to do whatever is necessary to help guarantee a meaningful experience for both them and the students. Certainly, you want to encourage students to take ownership of the project; however, you must balance that with consistently monitoring their progress.

Once the connection is established and the project defined, much of the follow-up can occur electronically with email and through students' log reports. During the semester, the log reports helped to keep the faculty member abreast of progress and hurdles for each group; only in a few instances did we have to get directly involved. However, while students were finishing their projects, we provided both verbal and written feedback on their work so that they could incorporate the suggestions into the final product. At the conclusion of the project, we followed-up with each organization and provided them with electronic documents for the final written report, presentation, and any spreadsheets that were generated. In addition, we asked for a little feedback from the organizations, and in particular, if any of the students stood out, or alternatively, if any of them seemed disengaged in some way. We felt that we had already asked for a lot of their time and did not request a lengthy evaluation. While much of this constitutes work beyond the typical classroom engagement for the instructor, we felt that the time spent on these activities is equivalent to the time spent prepping eight class meeting times, so that the net time cost was close to zero.

In addition, there may be some monetary costs associated with the CBL, and specifically travel costs. In an urban area, these could be minimized by public transportation. But in a rural

setting, where students could be driving 50-60 miles round-trip, funds may need to be secured to compensate student mileage, or reserving cars/vans to get them to their organizations. In any event, problems do arise when students are traveling off-site, and instructors need to be prepared to be flexible by allowing for last minute adjustments to the schedule.

Other implicit, non-monetary costs include the reputation for both you and your institution. Placing students in organizations as representatives of both you and your institution is somewhat risky. In the event that the students do not meet expectations, community partners may no longer be willing to work with you and your university in the future. Again, staff at your institution may be able to help mitigate these fears by providing training to students. In addition, it is imperative that the instructor reiterate expectations to the students and intervene if necessary. Again, if students know that the course is centered on a significant CBL project, there should be positive self-selection in the course, by attracting students who are interested in these types of experiences.

Table 2. Costs and Benefits of CBL Project

Costs	Benefits
Loss of traditional course content	“Deep” experiential learning
Working with community organizations: establish relationships, develop projects, monitor progress, provide feedback	Engage with local community, develop sense of community, promote civic engagement
Community organization must dedicate staff time to management of project	Meaningful project for local organization and for students
Transportation costs for students	Develop life skills: leadership skills; written/verbal communication; working with different types of people; data analysis
Reputation (instructor, university)	Relationships with local organizations (instructor, university)

Despite these challenges, the CBL project provides numerous benefits to the students, instructor, community partners, and your institution. As McGoldrick (2002 and others suggest,

experiential learning fosters “deep learning” so that students better comprehend the concepts from class. A CBL project allows students to engage with the local community in a meaningful, yet academic way. This sort of experience forces students to develop important life skills, such as team building, leadership development, and written and oral communication. Community-based projects also put students face-to-face with different types of people; ones that they may not certainly encounter on a college campus or other aspect of their lives. Learning to work with people of different socioeconomic, cultural or academic backgrounds is should be an important part of their undergraduate career. In addition, while a course that has a CBL project may attract a certain type of student (one who is interested in engaging with the local community), it may be the first experience some students have with a community organization (in fact, this was the case for 26% of our student sample). For some, this experience may be the starting point for other meaningful relationships with local nonprofit organizations during their collegiate experience and perhaps well beyond that.

The local organization also has much to gain, assuming that students produce high quality projects that are developed to meet a need. We have found that many of the local nonprofit organizations we work with lack sufficient staff to run their programs, and thus have little time to do research-based projects that help them support the good work they do. In fact, when we first approached the organizations, we were surprised at how interested they were in working with us, and quickly realized how they often have many ideas but do not have the resources and time to get them accomplished. Thus, our students are filling an important need by providing them the necessary labor and expertise to complete a project. In addition, given that the majority of the students were Economics concentrators, they had good quantitative skills that could be put to good use. As evident in Table 1, the majority of the projects were centered on data collection

and/or data analysis. We have found that local nonprofit organizations often have lots of great data, but do not always have the capacity to analyze their data. The extent of the data analysis that the students performed was done in spreadsheets (there is no Econometrics requirement for the class), but still almost all of the organizations were impressed by the students' abilities to first enter all of the data electronically and then analyze it in ways that are accessible to the organizations. Again, many of these organizations do not have staff that can do this work on-site on a regular basis and we feel this is where the students' projects added value. This sort of low-level data analysis was also very rewarding for students. They realized how valuable their quantitative skills are in the real world, and were able to hone and market these skills more effectively as a result of their projects.

Finally, both the instructor and the university can benefit from building strong relationships with local organizations. For example, instructors develop a deeper understanding of what local practitioners do, which has positive effects in class lectures and discussions. In addition, the students' experiences at local organizations often provide more credibility to what is being taught in the classroom (Pribbenow, 2005). By working with local organizations, instructors may gain access to data that they did not know existed, which can benefit the instructors' future scholarship. Universities place high value on the relationships they have with local organizations as a way of providing evidence that the institution is serious about civic engagement and providing direct ways for the students to give back to their local community. However, in giving back, the students soon realize that what they gain is often much larger than what they contributed to the experience. Universities often market activities that engage with the local community in local media outlets to improve their public relations. In addition, these

stories are powerful in recruiting new students to the university who are looking for specific examples of how student are engaged with the local community.

Overall, we have found that while there are significant costs of incorporating this sort of experience into an Economics course, the benefits are significant. In the next section, we will assess the extent to which these benefits are realized (compared to just being perceived).

V. Assessment

In this section, we discuss the results of a detailed survey we administered to both sections of the class in the fall of 2013. The survey was adapted by from Gelmon et al. (2001) and was designed and distributed using Qualtrics Survey Software.⁴ The survey collected student information in four categories: (1) detailed information about the student, (2) the student's perspective about their experience in the community-based learning project, (3) the student's attitude toward community involvement, and (4) their personal reflections on the experience. Of the 48 students who completed the class, 27 students completed the survey in its entirety. Twenty-two of the respondents were male and five were female, twenty-two were economics majors, fourteen were members of either a fraternity or sorority, eight students received financial aid and seven students had a work-study job. Summary statistics are provided in Table 3. For most of the questions, students responded on a five point Likert scale according to the following measures:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neither agree nor disagree

⁴ The survey can be found at:
https://colgate.co1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_b7UNjPXetq4zj2R&Preview=Survey&BrandID=colgate

4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

While less than half of the students said that they were involved in community service before this class, most came out of the experience with the attitude that community service ought to play a bigger role in their lives and only one student said that he would definitely not engage in more community service in the future. Every student learned how to become more involved in their community as a result of the CBL experience, and all but two thought that the work they did would be useful to the community partner.

The students also found that the community-based project had academic value. Nearly all students could see how the experience tied to the classroom material and found value above ordinary community service. They found that the group work and presentations enhanced their leadership skills as well as their communication skills.

The students nearly universally agreed that this type of project should be practiced more at the institution. This was not an onerous task that needed to be completed for a grade. The experience helped the community in a meaningful way, enhanced research and presentation skills for the students and instilled in them ways in which they can and will help their community in the future.

When evaluating the effectiveness of a service-learning course, one must be concerned with selection. Students who choose to take the course, knowing that there is a community-based project involved, may be those who have extensive experience with volunteer service and thus have different attitudes than the general student body. This was the first volunteer experience for eight (of the 27) students and another nine students reported almost no volunteer experience. This alleviates some of the concern that only students who are involved in

community service will sign up for the course. T-tests could not reject equality of means for most of the survey questions based on previous experience⁵. The project component of the course was more than volunteer service, however, so it is likely that even those with previous experience volunteering in the community had a lot to learn. There was one notable exception, however. Students with no previous volunteer experience are more likely to become aware of their personal biases as a result of the CBL.

None of the responses differed by gender in a statistical sense (although this could be due to the small sample of females in the class). When we compare students who do and do not receive financial aid we once again find little difference in terms of statistical significance. One student is clearly an outlier in the data and when he is not included, students without financial aid were statistically more likely to say that the CBL got them out of their college “bubble”.

Finally, we compare perspectives, attitudes and reflections based on fraternity/sorority membership. Those involved in Greek life were much less likely to see the value of CBL, as evidenced by their responses indicating less of an agreement that this type of learning should be practiced more at the university. The fraternity and sorority members did not disagree with this statement; however, they just did not feel as strongly about agreeing with it.

⁵ Tables showing the summary statistics based on the different characteristics and p-values for test of equal means are available upon request.

Table 3. Results of Student Survey, Spring 2012 and Spring 2013 (27 respondents)

Experience Perspective	Mean	SD	Min	Max
I had a stake in the development of the community-based learning project in this course.	4.15	0.864	1	5
The work I did in the community-based project will be useful to the community organization I worked with	4.04	0.940	1	5
The community participation aspect of this course helped me to see how the subject matter I learned can be used in everyday life	4.07	0.997	1	5
The community-based project I did through this course helped me to better understand the lectures and readings in this course	3.56	1.121	1	5
I feel I would have learned more from this course if more time was spent in the classroom instead of doing community work	2.37	1.115	1	5
I feel that I enhanced my disciplinary skills, including team work, writing, presenting and leadership, as a result of this project	3.78	0.934	2	5
The idea of combining work in the community with university coursework should be practiced in more classes at this institution	4.04	0.808	2	5
The community-based learning project was more than community service	4.07	0.675	2	5
The community-based learning project tied closely to the curriculum of the class	3.96	0.854	2	5
The community-based learning project got me out of the “college bubble” in a meaningful way	4.30	0.669	2	5
The community-based learning project helped to improve the relationship between the institution and the local community	4.19	0.736	3	5

Table 3. Continued, Results of Student Survey

Attitude towards community involvement	Mean	SD	Min	Max
The community participation aspect of this course showed me how I can become more involved in my community.	4.04	0.587	3	5
The community-based project helped to meet needs in the organization that I worked with.	4.15	0.662	2	5
I feel that the community-based project I did through this course benefited the surrounding community.	3.93	0.730	3	5
I was already volunteering in my community before taking this course.	2.70	1.265	1	5
I have a responsibility to serve my community.	3.96	0.706	2	5

Reflections on experience	Mean	SD	Min	Max
The community-based project involved in this course helped me to become more aware of the needs in my community	4.22	0.641	3	5
Most people can make a difference in their community	4.33	0.620	3	5
I developed a good relationship with the instructor of this course because of the community work we performed	3.81	0.681	2	5
I was comfortable working with cultures other than my own	4.30	0.609	3	5
The community work involved in this course made me aware of some of my own biases and prejudices	3.74	0.944	1	5
The work I performed in this course helped me learn how to plan and complete a project	3.78	0.751	2	5
Participating in the community helped me enhance my leadership skills	3.89	0.698	2	5
The work I performed in the community enhanced my ability to communicate my ideas in a real world context	3.96	0.808	2	5
I can make a difference in my community	4.15	0.602	3	5
I probably won't volunteer or participate in the community after this course	2.00	0.832	1	4
Participation in community-based project altered my career plans in some way	2.33	1.144	1	5
I may engage in more community outreach as a result of participating in this community-based project	3.52	0.849	1	5

VI. Conclusion

The goal of this paper is to motivate Economics instructors to introduce meaningful community-based learning (CBL) projects into their classes. We provide details on an effective CBL project in a course on the Economics of Poverty, and analyze its impacts on student learning. Overwhelmingly, the students, instructors, and community organizations involved in this project have felt that CBL engages students in the content, enhances their learning, and exposes them to important work that is being done in local communities. We feel that the benefits of introducing this type of project into an Economics course clearly exceed the costs. In addition, this type of project could be introduced into many different types of Economics courses, including Environmental Economics, Law and Economics, Health Economics, Development Economics, and other courses that have policy components. We provide detailed instructions and checklists for instructors to incorporate a CBL project into their class, and also cite the relevant literature on CBL that suggests CBL is an increasingly popular form of innovative teaching and learning in many disciplines.

Certainly, much of the research on CBL focuses on how college instructors integrate CBL into their curricula. However, local organizations have to decide if they have capacity to engage in these activities. Littlepage et al. (2012) discuss what factors affect the local organizations' willingness to work with students in various forms of CBL, and find that past experiences with students and their perception of student benefits are the most important reasons why community organizations continue to take on more students in the future. Thus, it is important for instructors to consult on-campus experts (typically in a center for volunteerism and service learning at most institutions) to get a sense of both interest and capacity of local organizations.

Importantly, CBL provides a unique opportunity for instructors to assess how the learning strategy is meeting course goals. We recommend that instructors formalize their goals of the CBL experience and link them to the appropriate assessment technique. By assessing the effectiveness of the CBL experience, instructors will be armed with important information for making adjustments to existing projects and for designing future projects.

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Appendix A. Description of CBL Project

Short description of CBL project in syllabus:

You will be assigned into small groups and each group will be assigned a local nonprofit organization to work with. You will be required to work on-site for at least 10 hours during the semester with your group. The on-site component will be during class periods on Tuesdays. The nonprofit organization and I will develop a project to work on during this period. The project will be academic in nature, and will require you to use the concepts we learn in class. Each group will have to prepare a final group project, which will consist of a written report and an oral presentation on-site. Both parts will be evaluated by both me and the nonprofit organization you work with.

Complete description for the final project:

(1) Oral Presentation (5% of your final grade in the class)

Each group will make a formal 15 minute presentation that includes two components: (1) some background of the organization you worked with and their missions and programs, and (2) the results of your specific project and how they can be used by the organization. Approximately one-third to one-half of the time should be devoted to background of the nonprofit, with the rest devoted to your project. The presented will be graded by me. Each member of the group is expected to equally participate in the presentation. The use of Powerpoint is required for your presentation.

(2) Written Report (20% of your final grade in the class)

Each group must produce a written report, incorporating comments from your presentation. The report should follow the outline of the presentation but should be written as a report to your non-profit organization. The first part must include an overview of the organization that you worked with, including their structure, their mission, their specific programs, and clientele. The second part should include the details of your project, including the need demonstrated by your organization for such a project, the process of your project, the results of your project and how they could be utilized by the non-profit organization. You should also discuss any hurdles you faced in your project and how the organization can implement your strategy in the future. You must cite related work throughout the paper (from class and other outside sources), and refer to figures and tables. If you have done significant data analysis, please be specific about the data you are using and the conclusions you draw from the data. You must also have a concise introduction and conclusion.

Please add a cover page to your group paper that includes the following:

Title

Names of Group Members

Date

A Short Abstract (1 paragraph about what you do)

A Short Description of the Class (1 paragraph)

Appendix B. Instructor Checklist for CBL Project

Prior to the semester:

- Incorporate language about the CBL project into the course description and course syllabus.
- Reach out to office/staff across campus to come up with a list of non-profit organizations (such as center for outreach/volunteerism or service learning).
- Contact non-profit organizations to see if there is interest in CBL project.
- Once the organizations are determined, determine schedule for project (dates and times on-site, deadline for project) and set expectations for community organization.
- Start brainstorming possible CBL projects for each organization.

At the beginning of the semester:

- Clearly set student expectations, define CLB and outline CBL projects.
- Confirm with organization: dates/times, deadlines, expectations (including log reports).
- Gather student preferences of organization placements.
- Assign groups to each organization; connect students to organizations via email.

During the CBL project:

- Monitor progress (using log reports); intervene if necessary.
- Make sure projects are well-defined.
- Do mid-term peer evaluation to students; intervene if necessary.

At the end of the semester:

- Coordinate site visits for group presentations (or host them on campus).
- Provide written and verbal feedback on presentations and draft reports.
- Distribute final copies of report, presentation and spreadsheets to organizations.
- Thank each organization and staff on campus that helped, and ask for a brief evaluation.
- Administer peer evaluations to students.

Appendix C. Log Reports and On-Site Evaluation

During each site visit, each group must complete the form below, have it signed by the on-site coordinator, and turn it in by the following class period.

Site:

Names of students who attended that day and indicate who drove:

Date and Time:

List some of the things you did on-site, what the topics of discussion were, what you learned, etc:

List tasks that your group needs to accomplish prior to your next site visit.

Signature of on-site coordinator: _____ Date: _____

Comments by on-site coordinator:

Appendix D. Peer Evaluation (administered at midterm and at the end of the semester)

Each group member must analyze the contribution of each member for your entire group project work, including the on-site work, the presentation and the final paper. For each member, you must evaluate how much he or she participated and contributed to the group work. For example, if there are 4 members in the group and each participated equally, you would allocate 25% to each member. The total must sum to 100%, and you must put your own contribution. You may also make comments if you feel necessary, but are not required to do so.

All information will remain confidential. Please fill out the form below and email it back to me. Failure to return this evaluation will result in a 5 point reduction in your overall grade.

Group Number/Name:

Your Name:

<u>Group Member</u>	<u>Contribution (%)</u>
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- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Comments: If you gave somebody less than 25%, please comment why.