

Community Partners' Perspectives on the Outcomes from International Service-learning Programs: Project scope and Method

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Abstract— In recent years, many universities have started working on development projects in developing and underdeveloped countries and have started to manage their own programs such as, EPICS. There are also several engineering organizations dedicated towards the needs in developed and developing countries such as, Engineering without Borders, and Engineering for Sustainable World. In these programs, engineering students, young professionals, and faculty members are directly involved in international development initiatives and projects in developing and underdeveloped countries. Traditionally, in the Service-learning literature, most of the studies have focused on the learning outcomes, perspectives and experiences of the students. Although research focusing on understanding the perspectives of community partners about Service-learning outcomes, is gaining momentum and continuously increasing, most of them focus on domestic Service-learning projects. Although, community partners' perspectives (in domestic service learning program) research grounds in theory and the implications and results are valuable and useful, but because of the complexities of cross-cultural differences associated with ISL programs, these findings may not be suitable and applicable for international service learning (ISL) programs. In a recent study Reynolds, calls for more informed and community centered research on the impacts of ISL programs and partnerships not only from students' perspectives but also on the host communities. This work-in-progress paper is the part of a larger project in which we intend to look into the community partners' perspectives on the outcomes of an international Service-learning program. Our major objective is to understand the community partner's motivations, benefits and challenges of partnerships with an international Service-learning program and develop recommendations to enhance partnership relationship in ISL programs. Through this work-in-progress paper we present a background literature review and description of project scope and methods.

Keywords—*International service learning partnerships; community partners; community engagement; service-learning*

I. INTRODUCTION

Service-learning research has been predominantly focused on students and students' outcomes, with little focus on faculty, institutes and community[1]. Eyler et al, conducted a review of the empirical literature from 1993-2000 on the effects of service-learning on various stakeholders and found that the

topic of community is the least researched area in service-learning[2]. Dorado and Giles, notes that although there has been some research on community impact on Service-learning, very few scholars have focused on the partnership relationships among partnering members[3]. Recently, few scholars have started focusing on the community partners' perspectives about the service learning programs outcomes but these studies are focused on the domestic service learning programs. The domestic service learning partnerships involve community partners located in the same country/state/city of the service learning program, on the other hand ISL partnerships involve community partners from other countries. The findings from domestic service learning partnership research are valuable and grounded in research but they might not be applicable on the international service learning programs due to the added cross-cultural complexities among partners. Thus, through this work in progress, we are proposing a research study focusing on the community partners' perspectives on the outcomes from an international service-learning partnership. The overall purpose of this study is to understand the community partner's perspectives on the outcomes from an ISL partnership as well as their motivations, and perceptions of benefits and challenges associated with their involvement with the ISL partnership. In this study, we will be exploring following research questions:

RQ1: Why community partner participate in an international service learning partnership (ISL)?

Sub question:

From the community partners' perspective, what are the motivations, benefits and challenges of an international service learning partnership?

RQ2: How do community partners perceive and understand the outcomes in an ISL partnership?

We hope that the findings from this study will be useful for ISL program coordinators, faculty members as well as students to understand the community partners' perspectives on the motivations, benefits and challenges of an ISL partnership. The findings will also be useful for understanding outcomes for community partners from an ISL partnership. Once the motivations, perspectives and outcomes from community

partners' perspectives are understood, ISL coordinators may improve their plans and strategies while partnering with international communities and ultimately may be able to achieve intended outcomes from the ISL program, knowing community partners' perspective may help in achieving positive impact of an international Service-learning program on community partners. In the following sections, we will be discussing the motivation and background for this study guided by the literature review.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, in the Service-learning literature, most studies have been focused on the learning outcomes, perspectives and experiences of the students[4][5]. For instance, studies have shown that service learning has a powerful impact on students' personal development[6] [7][8] and students tend to develop an increased sense of social responsibility when involved in service learning projects [6][9][10][7][11][12]. However, little research to date has focused on the experiences of the community partners, which is somewhat surprising given that they are an essential part of service learning programs. In recent years, research focusing on understanding the perspectives of community about service-learning outcomes is gaining momentum and continuously increasing [13][14][3][15] and most of these studies focus on domestic service-learning projects. For instance, authors focused on community partners' perspective regarding their motivations, benefits to the academic institutions and to their own organization, impacts on students' learning, and areas for improving partnerships[3][15][16][17].

While research on community partners' perspectives (in domestic service learning projects) has been grounded in theory and the implications and results are valuable and useful, these findings may not be suitable and applicable for international service learning (ISL) partnerships due to the added complexities that come with contextual and cross-cultural differences. In recent years, universities have started working on development service learning projects in developing and underdeveloped countries and have started to manage their own service learning programs such as, Engineering Projects in Community Service (EPICS)[18]. There are also several engineering organizations dedicated towards the needs in developed and developing countries such as, Engineering without Borders [19], and Engineering for Sustainable World. In these programs, engineering students, young professionals, and faculty members are directly involved in international development initiatives and projects in developing and underdeveloped countries. Crabtree, argues that ISL often engages students in development interventions that includes health and education interventions, therefore it is necessary to understand and incorporate participatory strategies, models and methods to understand the perspectives of the community partner[20]. In a recent study, Reynold explores a partnership between college of engineering and a rural municipality in Nicaragua. In this study, he argues that due to the nature of the development projects and cross cultural differences involve in ISL partnership, it is necessary to have more informed and community centered research on the impacts of ISL programs

and partnerships not only from students' perspectives but also on the host communities[21]. In the following section, we will be discussing the research method for this study that includes context and participants, data collection and analysis plan.

III. METHOD

Context and Research Participants

For this multiple case study, we will collect data from 3-4 ISL projects in 3 different universities with Indian community partners to understand the variation of the community partners' experiences in ISL partnership. The intended sites for data collection will be the locations of ISL project community partners in India and partnering universities or institutions in the USA. One of the ISL program for this study will be Engineering Projects in Community Service (EPICS), Purdue. The target population for this research are the community partners involved in ISL partnership, students, advisors and staff members of the ISL project at the partnering universities or institutions. Each community organization have 1-3 community partners who are generally associated with the specific ISL program. Each ISL program have can have 5-15 students in the team, 1-2 faculty advisor and 1 graduate staff. Based on this information, we will be interviewing 6-9 community partners, 5-6 students and 3-5 faculty advisors and 2-3 graduate teaching staff.

Data Collection and Analysis

We are planning to use a *qualitative multiple case study* research design and method based on Yin's case study method (2003)[22]. We will be using multiple methods for data collection to achieve in-depth understanding of the cases. We are planning to collect qualitative data in forms of semi-structured and open-ended interviews, and policy documents of universities or institutions that required for ISL partnerships. These interviews can be face to face or over the web depending upon the availability and funding situations. The semi-structured interview in this case study will involve open-ended questions followed by follow-up questions focusing on goals, outcomes for the community, community and student learning, motivations for involvement, characteristics of desirable partnerships, challenges and suggestions for improvements. Each participant i.e. community partners, students, faculty advisors and staff involved in ISL partnership will be interviewed approximately for 20-40 minutes. These interviews will be audio recorded and will be transcribed later on. We will also be collecting any policy documents used by universities or institutions while partnering with international community partners. In most of the cases, universities or institutions sign a memorandum with the international community partners. We will also be looking at the mission and vision statements of universities /institutions and international community organizations to understand their core values of service learning programs.

We are planning to analyze the data from this study by following Stake's (1995) recommendations[23]. The data analysis of this case study will start with the description of the cases and a detailed view of aspects about the case. The description of the case will include detailed information about the ISL programs under study, vision and mission of the

programs, information about the participants such as community partners, community representatives, students, program administrator, and faculty advisors. Based on Stake's (1995) suggestion for analyzing a case study, we will be focusing on "categorical aggression" in which we will seek a collection of instances from data and will look for patterns and emerging themes. We will be coding transcripts of interviews thematically and will be analyzing simultaneously with themes emerging from the analysis of the field observations and policy documents. Thus in this case study, we will not focus on the narrative descriptions and direct interpretation rather we will be looking for the emergent themes that can answer my research questions. As we are planning to follow CBPR paradigm, community partners will also be involved in the analysis process. Research participants will help in the meaning making process while analyzing the data. As the final step, we will be looking for connections between emerging themes and will report the results in the form of interrelated categories. All the interpretation and findings will be shared with the research participants to ensure equal participation from the community partners.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this work in progress paper, we discussed the literature review that guides the motivation and background of this research study. We also discussed the purpose of the study and research questions based on the motivations and background. od and methodology for this research study. The purpose of this study is to understand the community partner's perspectives on the outcomes from an ISL partnership as well as their motivations, and perceptions of benefits and challenges associated with their involvement with the ISL. We believe that the findings from this study will be useful for ISL program coordinators, faculty members as well as students to understand the community partners' perspectives on the motivations, benefits and challenges of an ISL partnership. The findings will also be useful for understanding outcomes for community partners from an ISL partnership. The findings can be presented to community partners to help them make more informed decisions, especially as these findings will explain appropriate expectations when working with ISL programs and students. The results can also help programs run efficiently. If the university intends to serve the community, understanding the challenges and benefits of the community and its organizations will allow community engagement programs to improve their processes accordingly. These findings can provide insight for improving program structures and may also inform further investigations of other international partnerships by providing a baseline of partnership between Indian community partners and university or institutions in the USA.

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