Due to the changing nature of the academic landscape, there is an increasing need to prepare graduate students for careers not only within, but also outside of academia. Despite evidence focused on the positive impact of undergraduate service-learning, little is known about comparable experiences of graduate students with professional aspirations within the academy or beyond. This study aims to answer the question, “What are the experiences of graduate students and community partners as they work together on a service-learning project?” In answering this question, we attempt to show a justification and need for project-based service-learning in graduate education.

**Keywords:** Service-learning; Civic Engagement; Community Engagement; Graduate Education

In considering the decision to pursue graduate school, John Komlos has explained, “By entering academia, you will have responsibility for the intellectual treasures of the ages, and by teaching and researching, you will have a chance to increase them and to relay them to successive generations. It can become an almost sacred endeavor in a predominantly secular age” (Goldsmith, Komlos, & Gold, 2001, p. 10). Indeed, graduate school, in general, and the Ph.D., in particular, is a unique form of advanced education where students are typically encouraged to dive deeply into the state of their chosen discipline, discover the ways that they can contribute to existing knowledge, and, in many cases, prepare to convey that knowledge to students.

At the same time, Komlos and his coauthors (2001) note that “there are a wide range of possible outcomes in an academic career” (p. 4). Many graduates will not secure a tenure track position at a college or university, a scenario that has become increasingly more prevalent within the humanities fields. A 2011 report found that less than half, or 43 percent, of humanities Ph.D. recipients did not have any job commitments after completing their academic programs (Straumsheim, 2013, ¶8). Even more specifically, a recent survey of history Ph.Ds. revealed that more than 24% were not employed as professors (tenure or non-tenure track), and their alternative forms of employment included working for non-profits, the federal government, and academic administration (Wood & Townsend, 2013). These possibilities of employment mean that graduate students would benefit from opportunities to connect their education to practice outside of academia, and academia can benefit from informed understandings of practice. In fact, researchers contend that such reports and surveys exhibit the increasing need for humanities departments, including communication studies, to "temper their students' expectations about finding a career in academe before even admitting them, and continue to highlight alt-ac opportunities" (Straumsheim, 2013, ¶8). Thus, service-learning may be a valuable supplement to graduate education that can benefit both students and communities.

Service-learning certainly supports democratic and civic engagement, especially when facilitated as a transformative learning practice that embraces community partners as co-educators (Mezirow, 2000; Saltmarsh. & Zlotkowski, 2011; Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2011). Without diminishing the significance of this function, we first draw attention to the career-related benefits of service-learning, inside and outside of the academy, for graduate students. We already know that undergraduate students who engage in community-based learning or community-based research projects report an advantage in the job market, better ability to define the type of work they would be likely to do within their field, and other more practical professional skills that resulted from the assignments (Litchenstein, Thorme, Cutforth, & Tombari, 2011; Simons & Cleary, 2006). Despite extensive research focused on undergraduate service-learning, less is known about comparable experiences of graduate students. Furthermore, if we accept the position that service-learning can be a valuable experience for graduate students, the question of implementation remains. The best practices established for undergraduate service-learning may not be applicable to graduate education.

This case study of community partnerships built for a graduate level communication course provides a touchstone to analyze the practical benefits of service-learning for graduate education.

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**A Truly Inspiring Notion:**

**A Case-Study of Project-Based Graduate Service-Learning**

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students. After a review of the relevant literature and methods of the study, we describe the perspectives of the students and community partners in terms of their experiences and the outcomes. With the understanding that such partnerships can present both opportunities and challenges, we will assess how both aspects of a campus/community partnership can benefit and develop the graduate student’s learning through awareness of and preparation for real-world application. In doing so, the findings and discussion section of this article will describe one pathway for project-based service-learning in graduate education. Comparing and contrasting the views of both the community partners and the students will help determine the most effective ways to implement project-based service-learning opportunities into graduate education for mutual advantage and success.

**Practices and Possibilities for Community-Based Learning**

The positive impact of service-learning on undergraduate students, in terms of both civic identity and on career development and discernment, is well-documented (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009). Less is known about the impact of service-learning on graduate students whose path leads to careers in the academy or beyond. This article explores perspectives on the professional impact of project-based service-learning in graduate-level coursework, and specifically how it can relate to career outcomes for graduate students. Therefore, the literature review focuses on work related to service-learning outcomes, transformative learning theories, and democratic engagement. Finally, we examine the existing research on service-learning in the field of communication studies, the disciplinary site of our case study.

Historically, service-learning has philosophical roots in the ideas espoused by John Dewey (1963/1938), who articulated the connection between doing, learning, critical thinking, and reflecting in relation to one’s community. Mezirow (2000) builds on our understanding of the impact by defining the potential outcomes of transformative learning. Transformation occurs as student experiences in the community challenge beliefs, assumptions, and most of all, one’s understanding of issues and cultures through deeper learning, relationship-building, critical perspective taking, and a more emotional connection to the work. Britt (2012) outlines a typology for three types of service-learning pedagogies: “skill-set practice and reflexivity,” “civic values and critical citizenship,” and “social justice activism.” While defined as three separate frameworks by which to understand service-learning, there is significant connection and crossover. For example, while “skill-set practice and reflexivity” places emphasis on active learning and disciplinary-specific materials, students engaging in service-learning projects with such goals can also be exploring and developing their own civic identities in relation to others in the community, a cornerstone of the “civic values and critical citizenship” typology (Britt, 2012).

The growth of service-learning as a pedagogical practice over the past three decades has coincided with the growing shift in higher education toward career preparation (Fain, 2017). In Wisconsin, for example, the governor recently proposed that all students of any of UW System school be required to complete a “real-world experience” related to one’s field of study as a condition of graduation (Herzog & Stein, 2017). Further, a 2013 report commissioned by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) detailed how three in four employers want colleges and universities to place more emphasis on critical thinking, complex problem-solving, communication, and real-world application (Hart Research Associates, 2013). A series of studies have provided strong evidence that service-learning at the undergraduate level increases students’ understanding of community issues, strengthens students’ cultural competence and ability to work alongside those from different backgrounds, and provides skills related to conflict resolution, interpersonal communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Astin & Sax, 1998). These are important professional skills that employers are seeking and expect job candidates to be capable of articulating during the hiring process. There is also evidence that service-learning can provide discipline-specific and general professional skills, as well as connect theory and practice for a better understanding of a student’s future career (Bennett, Drane & Henson, 2003).

The shift in higher education toward professional preparation applies to post-bachelor programs as well. While the basis for graduate education is to provide a mastery of theory within a field, there is also an emphasis on training graduate students for work outside of the academy, especially as students enter competitive job markets and professional environments with expectations related to competencies in teamwork, critical thinking, and interpersonal and cross-cultural communication.
skills. Some literature exists that demonstrates the impact of service-learning on graduate students in these arenas; in fact, Gregory Jay (2010) asserts that the future of the humanities depends on “the organized implementation of project-based engaged learning and scholarship” (p. 51). Levkoe, Brail, and Daniere (2014) found that graduate students engaged in service-learning projects in geography and planning courses developed professional networks and a glimpse into professional work environments, learned how to collaborate with others within the context of an undefined project, and, for those going on to the professoriate, it offered service-learning as a new teaching tool.

Transformative learning theory and Britt’s typology of different service-learning pedagogies framed how we established the learning goals for students in the course we are examining. Further, a set of principles based on “democratic engagement” informed how we identified and worked with community partners. Jameson et al. (2011) outline the importance of mutually transformative campus and community partnerships, and describe how the tenants of such work is antithetical to the culture of graduate education. They offer that democratic community engagement “defines all partners in community-engaged scholarship as responsible agents in the collaborative processes by which we understand and co-create the world around us” (p. 260). They further offer a set of conditions for transformative partnerships. These conditions include the idea of partnerships that embrace a developmental and relationship-based journey for all involved, a flattening of power dichotomies in contrast to the traditional faculty-as-expert model, sustained relationships, and use of language that respects the collaborative nature of the work.

Students who engage in meaningful service that has a community impact are more likely to benefit from service-learning experiences compared to those whose work is unstructured or where impact is not realized or recognized. Sandy and Holland (2006) provide suggestions from the community partner perspective based on their study of 99 community partners in California. They found that establishing strong relationships between community engagement professional staff on campuses, the faculty, and non-profit professionals was key. Further, they found that non-profit leaders recognize, enjoy, and identify with their role as co-educators to students in the learning process, which they found to be a reason to partner with local universities, beyond the more tangible benefits the agency receives through student placements. But, tangible benefits also drive good partnerships. Besides the direct impact that student service-learning has on agency consumers, agencies also recognized that service learners often “tackle” important projects that staff do not have time to complete, strengthening the organizational capacity of the agency (Boulin and Perry, 2009; Sandy and Holland, 2006). The agencies also recognized staff and organizational enrichment, increased community capacity, and social capital realized by being connected to institutions of higher education. Service learners often continue to benefit the community partner even after the end of the semester, many continuing with the agency after their course was complete and acting as ambassadors, recruiting other volunteers, and educating people about the issues. Furthermore, Boulin and Perry (2009) found that service learners would bring new ideas and perspectives to the agency and its work.

O’Meara and Jaeger (2006) explain that despite the potential benefits, there are barriers to community engagement and service-learning at the graduate level. For example, at most doctoral institutions, which serve as the training ground for future faculty, individual grant-funded research is valued above collaborative, community engaged practice or scholarship, which is largely unfunded. As a result, graduate students are not encouraged to explore community-based teaching practice (O’Meara & Jaeger, 2006.) These graduate students, who are not taught community engaged teaching or research practices, later become the trainers of future faculty, and thus reinforce the individual and insular culture of the academy. However, Jay (2010) offers solutions to this specific to the humanities field, including developing project-based engagement that would allow students from different cohorts to extend the partnership beyond a single semester or year, asserting that “such sustained programmatic engagement is also more likely to find outside funding” (p. 59). An ongoing partnership and continued learning opportunities would increase the likelihood of graduate students linking the experience to gained knowledge and thus the output of public scholarship related to the service-learning.

The communication field sits in a fertile space for community-based learning projects. Applegate and Morale (1999) describe the connection between communication studies and community-based learning and research as a “natural fit” because, as they write, “Engaging in dialectic and connecting with others are inherently acts of communication” (p. xi). In a study by Garner and Barnes (2013), interviews conducted with business leaders revealed desired communication skills for potential employees, with participants emphasizing “the
need for students to demonstrate that they can apply 'book knowledge' in 'real-world settings’” (p. 116). Soukup (1999) provides a list of benefits, including that service-learning requires communication that leads to relationship-building, it provides opportunities to interact with a more diverse population than a student might experience in class, and it offers the chance to acquire skills through experiences in the field. While these are valuable to disciplines across the academy, they are central to fields that are grounded in the humanities.

Despite the perceived value of these experiences, the implications of the impact of service-learning on students at the graduate level are left largely unexplored. In a discussion of the role of the academic (specific to the communication field) in the public sphere, one participant noted that scholars "have an obligation to the community to disseminate what we’ve learned and to use what we’ve learned to help solve problems” (Dempsey et al., 2011, p. 265). But what does this mean for the graduate student in the humanities who may be on a path to a career outside the academy? Reflecting on personal experience with service-learning courses, Badger (2017) suggests that instructors first "must be able to articulate a reason for the partnerships... beyond attaching the increasingly popular service-learning designation to a course. Ideally, we will emphasize communication skill-building that is learned alongside of, challenged by, and learned from" community partners (p. 372). James and Logan (2016) began the conversation of service-learning impact by examining community partner perspectives, and this study hopes to extend that discussion to consider the ways in which the graduate students can not only assist a community organization by utilizing scholarly knowledge and an academic foundation on a project basis, but also gain transferable, practical skills and experience that will enhance their ability to grow and develop within or beyond the academy.

Method

This case study aims to illustrate the need for project-based graduate level service-learning that fosters real-world application of academic skills in an effort to better prepare students for a career outside of the academy, and is based on the experiences of students and community partners who have engaged in collaborative, professionally-grounded projects. Case study methodology is useful when researchers want to do a deep exploration of an issue using a case examined by multiple data sources (Creswell, 2007). With little research about graduate level service-learning in the communication field that extends beyond its ties to social justice and activism, we believe that the thoughts and experiences of community partners and students offer an important starting place to develop a justification for and determine best practices of a nuanced aspect of service-learning which includes professional development and preparedness. Our analysis of multiple data sources included interviews with community partners, a student focus group, and a textual analysis of student reflection journals. In doing so, we sought innovative ideas and a deep understanding of the challenges various stakeholders had in the process as well as the added value related to organizational capacity and student learning. This type of research allows for such examination of processes that are interpreted from various perspectives, where behaviors are understood subjectively from different vantage points and where there has been little innovation in practice or structure (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

This case study is based on a set of community partnerships that were established for a graduate level communication course in argumentation, taught by one of the authors of this study. The university that provides the context for the course is deeply rooted in its urban community, with students completing more than 50,000 hours of service each year throughout the city. The partnerships for the argumentation course were solicited based on the knowledge of university staff who are responsible for coordinating the logistics of most of the campus / community non-profit partnerships, one of whom is an author of this essay. All of the community partners who were solicited for projects for the partnership had hosted students prior to the Fall 2015 course. We reached out to locally-based social action organizations, and many of them expressed a need for communication projects such as social media plans, water quality awareness messaging, and white papers related more specifically to various women’s and older adult issues. Initial meetings were held between the faculty member for the course and each potential community partner to discuss the faculty-established learning goals and community partner needs, with an emphasis on developing a cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship. Ultimately Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) were signed between five community partners, the faculty member, and the campus civic engagement office during the summer of 2015. Typically considered best practice in community based service-learning, an MOU is a non-legal, but formal, document which serves to outline expectations of various
parties who work in partnership; in this case, the faculty member, graduate students, and community partner (see appendix for the MOU template used in our case study). The faculty member, civic engagement director, and non-profit representative from each agency worked on developing these MOUs, however the creation of MOUs does not guarantee that the agreement will be used as a guide during the service-learning process.

Nine graduate students participated in the argumentation course in Fall 2015, one of whom is an author of this essay. Of those nine, only two students were not enrolled in a program in the Communication Department. The students in the course consisted of five doctoral students, one master's student from outside of communication, one certificate program student, and one non-degree student. Six of the students identified as male, and three of the students identified as female. At the beginning of the semester, students in the course were given the MOUs to identify interest of topic as well as task, and students were then matched with community partners. Once the students were registered for a particular project, it became the responsibility of the student and the community partner to fulfill the project goals. Over the course of the semester, students were expected to write approximately 10 reflection journal entries making explicit connections between course theories and practical application.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

This case study reflects on the experiences and perceived outcomes of a project-based service-learning experience from a graduate-level communication course in argumentation, held in the Fall 2015 semester at a public, urban access, research institution. Data for this study was collected in three ways. First, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with community partners involved in the service-learning component of the course. Interviews were audio-recorded so they could be played back as we looked for ideas and emergent themes related to graduate-level service-learning. A sample of the open-ended questions included: 1) What challenges did you anticipate when engaging in this project? And, did those challenges, or any unexpected challenges, present themselves? 2) In what ways, if any, did this experience benefit your organization? 3) Did it matter that this project was done with graduate students versus undergraduate service learners? We requested interviews with all five community partners, and we were able to schedule interviews with representatives from three, including a representative from an agency that advocates for abused children, a women's shelter and advocacy organization, and an arts organization that employs creative storytelling for older adults with memory loss. The student researcher on this study did not participate in the interview with her community partner.

Additionally, a focus group was conducted with student participants in the communication course. Although all nine class participants were invited to the focus group, five students chose to participate (and one of the students enrolled in the course, this paper's co-author, helped lead the discussion). Three of the participants were Ph.D. students in Communication, one was a non-degree student, and one had just completed a Master's in a different discipline. Questions were similar in nature and scope to those presented to the community partners but tailored to address the student experience. These open-ended questions were designed to gather information related to student expectations, challenges faced, their ability to connect theory to practice, and their perceived academic and professional growth through the service-learning experience. One of the researchers did not attend the focus group because she was the instructor for the course, and we did not want the students to be intimidated by her presence or feel unable to offer critique of the service-learning component of the course. A sample of the semi-structured focus group questions included: (a) What, if any, additional challenges did you face when working with your community partner? Were these challenges anticipated? Were you able to overcome them? And what would have made them easier to manage? (b) In what ways, if any, did you grow academically and professionally? (c) In what ways, if any, did the experience enhance your classroom learning? In what ways, if any, could the theory to practice connection have been improved?

Interview and focus group recordings were analyzed by the researchers to identify emergent themes, innovative ideas, and specific information key to assessing perceived outcomes of the service-learning experience and implications for professional preparation for potential careers outside of academia. Community partner responses were measured against graduate student responses to assess parallels or inconsistencies in perceived expectations, outcomes, and learning. One of the primary items we were looking for was either congruent or incongruent understanding between the students and community partners as related to expectations, outcomes, and perceived student learning.

In addition to the data collection through interviews and the student focus group, student reflection journals were examined to triangulate the study. Following best practices for service-
learning, students were asked to write weekly reflection journals, where the assignment called on students to make explicit connections between their service-learning experience and the weekly theoretical readings. As a final form of data to inform the proposed model, a textual analysis was done on the weekly reflection journals to further consider the student experience, evidence of theory-to-practice understanding, and reflection related to personal and professional growth. Of the nine students enrolled in the course, we received permission from six students, including the student researcher on this study, to analyze journal submissions. The student researcher did not participate in the analyses in order to preserve privacy of student assignments. Analysis of these journals provides a temporal lens to the graduate service-learning experience because it allows us to see changes across time, and the analysis can reveal specific insights that students made at the time of the service-learning experience, rather than rely only on later reflection.

The small number of participants in this study does not allow for generalizability, however the voices of the community partners and students offered valuable insight to inform our justification of the need for project-based service-learning at the graduate level to bolster professional growth and exposure to practical application of knowledge outside of the academy. Further, researchers intentionally engaged in triangulation, “the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 202), so that there was depth to the concepts that arose out of the interviews, focus group, and textual analysis of the journals.

Findings

Through analysis of the audio recordings and notes from each of the one-on-one interviews with community partners and the focus group with graduate students, the researchers identified several emergent themes and consistencies. Graduate student themes were further affirmed through textual analysis of their weekly reflection journals, which often aligned with sentiments shared in the focus group setting. The dominant themes identified for both groups were clear and pervasive, and thus easily grouped to address issues of motivation, communication, and discomfort. We were unable to identify any significant differences based on educational level, research focus, or gender. These categories have informed the development of this essay proposing specific practices of project-based service-learning in graduate education.

High Motivation for Partners and Graduate Students Yields Partnership Satisfaction

We found that consistently all community partners expressed enjoyment in working with graduate students. All three partners interviewed agreed that graduate students bring an enhanced skill set to their service-learning, including both discipline-specific skills and a command of the ever-important soft-skills. Despite some discussion about a desire for increased communication, they all cited that graduate students’ ability to work independently was appealing and beneficial for the community partner and their organizations. Community partners who had previously engaged in service-learning projects with undergraduates noted a clear difference between their experiences with these two levels of students. This is a distinction that we have termed “mastery” versus “discovery.” Undergraduates tend to be guided by a task set out by the course instructor with the organization, whereas the hope is that graduate students will have an active role in defining shared goals that not only match the needs of the organization but also align with their research and professional interests. Ideally, graduate students are not simply discovering insights about community through their service, but because they are often beginning with a stronger skill set and defined career goals, graduate students can work to master skills that provide a clear benefit to partner organizations.

One community partner stated simply, “The skill set of graduate students is just greater,” also noting that the specific student was “very independent – and did deliver.” When asked specifically if having a graduate-level student as a service-learning partner made a difference for the organization, another community partner stressed:

> It did matter because the sophistication of their final product was ‘graduate level’ rather than what I would expect from a typical undergrad. Based on my general experience, the final plan and product was definitely not what I would expect from an undergrad. It was clear and useful.

The third community partner echoed these sentiments: “In general an undergrad would have needed more framework, and I don’t know that the product would have been useable. For undergrads, it’s more of an educational experience for the students, but the product isn’t useful. With graduate students, the products can be useful for the organizations.”
Regardless of whether graduate students in general are actually better equipped to be successful in project-based service-learning, the community partners were consistent in expressing a desire to work with graduate students.

Graduate students affirmed these perceptions of motivation in both the focus group and journals. Even graduate students who did not feel deeply connected to the mission of their partner organization expressed a pervasive desire to make a difference through the service-learning project. Throughout the journal reflections and in the focus group, students discussed their hopes to impact the organization through meaningful work during the semester project. At the beginning of the semester, one student wrote:

At the risk of sounding overly dramatic and saccharine, this realization—that we might have a positive impact on those suffering from abuse right here in our own city—is a truly inspiring notion. Too often, it can feel as though our scholarly work, although well-intentioned, does not necessarily get to the very individuals/organizations (be it in the workplace, within romantic relationships, among underprivileged populations, etc.) we are interested in researching.

Similar sentiments were shared consistently among all students in the course.

This desire to make a difference is evidenced through continued— or the offer of persisting—relationships between the students and community partners. One student’s project extended throughout the following semester and another student offered to stay on, though the organization did not deem it necessary. Another student shared that at the end of the semester the community partner had offered a paid position in order to continue the work. The student reflected, “I thanked them for the offer, and expressed that I felt we did not do as much for them as we’d hoped... Ultimately, I told [them] that I am unable to commit to a contractual relationship because of time constraints; however, I said, I am more than happy to continue serving as a consultant for them on projects here and there in the future.”

**Faltering Communication Impedes Partnership Satisfaction**

Community partners cited familiarity with the organization as an existent challenge when working with graduate students— or any service-learning partner or volunteer. The short timeframe of a semester presents a challenge when it comes to integration into the culture of an organization. While these factors were anticipated, in hindsight the community partners acknowledged ways to address and potentially overcome these challenges in the future. For instance, one community partner stated: “I would have gotten them to come to our events more,” noting that incorporating volunteers and students into more of the day-to-day of the organization would help them do their work and feel more fulfilled. Another community partner mentioned the challenge of a lack of institutional knowledge when beginning a service-learning project and the importance of not only a subject-matter familiarity but also an ability to adopt the messaging, language, and tone of the organization — a possible difficulty for someone who is not integrated into the organization’s daily routine. The issue of time was broached by all, summarized by one community partner who stated: “A semester is too short. You can’t do that deep of a dive in one semester — the beneficial work comes out later — in a year you can be a part of the community. The deeply engaged work feels more meaningful.”

A majority of the graduate students affirmed that there were problems with communication, something that was deemed essential for the success of the project. Issues identified that fall under this umbrella include: waiting on materials from the community partner, significant wait-time for responses to emails or phone calls, postponed meetings, and lack of direction. The graduate students we spoke with all agreed that communication was not only highly-valued but critical, and better communication could have strengthened not only the final product but also the overall relationship with the organization.

When asked to specify a challenge of this project, one graduate student stated without hesitation: “Communication issues... It was tough at times, not having the information, guidance or access to people, which hindered our ability to do things to help us create this finished product.” Another student added: “They didn’t work with me — there was no day-to-day participation in what I was doing.” Identifying this as a challenge also indicated that there was a desire for additional communication, as one student wrote in a journal reflection: “I understand completely that resources are limited and that they have a lot to focus on at any given time (hence, why we were pulled in to help in the first place), but it feels like we are doing a whole lot of waiting, and not a lot of doing.” This desire to do — to make a difference —
was consistently expressed by all student participants.

Community partners and students independently suggested similar solutions to potential communication problems. Community partners insisted on the need for a productive and informative launch meeting to establish individual and shared goals and create consistent understanding. Additionally, two of the community partners mentioned that a wrap-up meeting at the end of the semester would have been helpful (the third had held one with the graduate student). Stressing the importance of the launch meeting, one community partner told us: “Especially with advanced students, you want to make sure that what you are asking them to do is already geared with what the students are interested in. Everything should fit as perfectly as you can.” Among these lines, another community partner stated that the launch meeting would have been more beneficial for the organization if they had gained “a better understanding of the expectations for the student and of the student.” With regard to a formal wrap-up, this community partner continued: “At the end of the semester, we realized we had to accept what they gave us because the class was over,” and the representative of the organization suggested that having clearly established goals up front and more regular communication with the student may have helped keep the project on track.

While all of the organizations had signed MOUs, none referenced the MOUs during the course of their work with students, and, in one case, the actual supervisor did not recall receiving a copy of the MOU. This was largely because the initial agency representative who took the lead on identifying and approving the project was often not the same person who oversaw the partnership and project on behalf of the agency.

Most of the graduate students noted that they did not receive feedback from their community partners after presenting them with a final product. This aligns with the idea that emerged from the community partners that a formal wrap-up meeting should be protocol and would be desirable for both the organization and the student. Graduate students crave feedback, as one student articulately put it: “Maybe they [the community partners] sort of forgot that we’re grad students and used to getting critical and negative feedback. It does not kill us to get an email that says, ‘Thanks for trying, but…’ That is something we can handle.”

Almost unanimously, the graduate students discussed this lack of feedback on their final service-learning projects. For example, one student stated, “I never received any formal feedback on what we provided them – I have no clue if we achieved what they wanted or if we crashed and burned.” From this, students did suggest that a formal follow-up would have been beneficial. One student stated, “I would have thought we would have had some kind of follow-up meeting to see what happened or how we did.” This desire for feedback – even if it be critical – speaks to the potential of practical and professional growth that project-based service-learning can provide for graduate students.

**Discomfort Both Enhances and Limits Partnership Satisfaction**

Another theme that emerged was the idea that service-learning brought graduate students a feeling of discomfort, pushing them beyond their comfort zone, which often presented its own challenges and surprising benefits. The predominant issues that caused this discomfort among the graduate students were a lack of institutional knowledge and a lack of understanding of organizational goals and needs. One student explained, “Ours [project] was reliant on scientific fluency, and it was difficult to parse through the technical information we did not ourselves understand and match it with the right audience. The disconnect between our lack of understanding of technical knowledge and the [community partner’s] lack of audience understanding made this difficult.” These challenges, coupled with a desire for more communication with and direction from the community partner, often placed the students in a position of feeling little control over the work they could produce – a divergent situation from what graduate students are used to in their academic and research pursuits. Notably, a discomfort with a lack of guidance did not appear to be perceived by the community partners, and the ability for independent work was praised by the community partners. Thus, this feeling of discomfort may have been of educational benefit by stretching students in ways they may not have been accustomed.

Feeling a sense of disconnect and the perception that the established project was not a priority for the organization contributed to the discomfort among the graduate students. One student stated: “The focus of the organization was not on our project at all. Our project wouldn’t have been implemented for five or six months in the future so it wasn’t really on their radar yet,” explaining that because the project was low priority, communication and direction were impacted. Another student added: “This project wasn’t a focus of theirs – it didn’t feel like a priority for them, and maybe it wasn’t, but that really came through in their lack of communication.” Despite students’ feelings of uncertainty related to impact, community
partners stated that they were pleased with the student work, suggesting that this level of discomfort could be remedied with improved communication and follow-up with the community partner.

Graduate students also expressed a sense of academic destabilization when there were unclear alignments between theory and practice. In the reflection journals where students were tasked with connecting their weekly work with the organization to the weekly assigned course readings, students attempted to find connection between theory and practice through their own individual lens of interpretation and understanding. Several students expressed in their journals and the focus group that this task was challenging. Some students expressed discomfort with their understanding of specific theories, and other students did not see clear connections between some theories and practice.

For example, in one journal a student stated, “Truthfully, how this will relate to my project is still to be discovered. I will need to spend some additional time thinking about it.” While this destabilization may have been uncomfortable for the students, it can be valuable for learning by pushing students to think deeply and critically about course concepts.

Though students did identify connecting theory to practice as a challenge, the majority of them took the opportunity to use this exercise to expand knowledge and push boundaries for learning. Students often made insightful comments about both specific theories and real-world practices that they had not previously considered. One student wrote in a journal entry:

As we continue to move through the assigned articles/chapters, I am discovering that I naturally try and match possible real-world examples (either related to the project or my final paper) with examples given in the class readings. Doing so helps to crystallize the conceptual breakdown for me.

Another student, in the focus group, stated:

The journals forced me to stretch the concepts – sometimes it was hard to find an explicit connection so for me I got to break the concepts apart and look at them from different angles – I went about it way differently, I guess – but I found that really fruitful. You could take them at face value or blow them apart – it was interesting for me.

A third student wrapped up the journal entries for the semester with: “…writing a weekly reflection challenged me to make connections between scholarly theory and real-life practice. This has helped me to think in a way I haven’t in a long time, and in a way I wasn’t sure I was able to.” Thus, despite perceived challenges, the majority of graduate students found success throughout the progression of the semester in their ability to connect theory with practice. The challenges and critical engagement with theory align with academic expectations for graduate students. Rather than simply understanding existing scholarship, students were forced to apply, question, and generate theory, all of which are vital to graduate education.

**Possibilities for Project-Based Graduate Service-Learning**

Our analysis of the case study has identified some clear challenges for any single semester, project-based graduate service-learning experience with community partners. Nevertheless, our analysis also suggests significant practical benefits that graduate students can apply both inside and outside of the academy. Most of the challenges are representative of real-world professional experiences that the academy does not always provide students. For example, the lack of direction or communication for students who generally have nurturing and supportive faculty whose job is to focus on the student experience is divergent from a busy, hierarchical workplace. Further, organizations generally have multiple projects and deadlines, versus the linear experience of students as they complete courses. While these challenges create discomfort, they provide meaningful learning experiences.

Our study finds benefits for both students and community partners for project-based service-learning. For graduate students, project-based service-learning enables students to have “products” to show, articulate, and demonstrate to future employers, enabling practical application and supporting the idea of “doing” as a way of learning (Dewey, 1944). If well-managed, this type of community partnership can also benefit partnering organizations because it utilizes graduate student expertise to create a useful product for the organization. Undergraduates, on the other hand, are ideal for placement-based service-learning because they fill a human resource need while engaging in “discovery” activities that can be related back to course content. In many cases, graduate students have moved from “discovery” to
“mastery,” making placement-based service-learning a less meaningful experience.

Coupled with existing research on the developing trend of humanities graduate students seeking careers outside of the academy, our findings speak in part to the need for more practical and applied service-learning opportunities at this level. Literature on this topic is lacking, particularly within the communication and humanistic disciplines, and our study is one step to begin filling that gap. Current scholarship focuses on social justice and activism as the foundational purposes of service-learning, especially when it comes to communication instruction. In fact, in an analysis of existing research on graduate level service-learning in the communication field, Frey and Palmer (2017) report few “publications that have focused... on critical pedagogy, civic education, service-learning, and community education,” and the authors “stress the importance of conducting such research” (p. 381). We believe this must extend beyond the tendency to examine service-learning from a social justice and activism perspective (Dempsey et al., 2011; Russell & Congdon, 2017) to an opportunity for career preparation and skill development.

Based on our analysis, we have developed recommendations for project-based service-learning in the graduate context that aim to capture the benefits, specifically related to professional applications of scholarly knowledge, of this type of service-learning, while addressing many of the problems we encountered in the case study. Our recommendations outline three distinct roles in project-based graduate service-learning. First, graduate students should take an active “leader” role in defining and building service-learning projects based on their research interests or area of theoretical expertise. Student leadership can lead to a symbiotic relationship because while community experts may have immense knowledge to share from a practitioner perspective, they may not be close to the prominent theories in the field or the latest research. Especially when students make a direct connection to their area of interest and expertise, they have something valuable to offer the community partner. The learning and sharing can go both ways and make the educational process beneficial and empowering for both student and community partner (Freire, 1970). A leadership role for students may help them confidently seek solutions to communication issues, while also empowering students to act without substantial direction or supervision from the community partner.

Further, greater alignment with students’ areas of expertise may help them see their discomfort and academic destabilization as productive learning opportunities that will bolster professional skill development and encourage them to integrate more fully.

Just as students should take a greater leadership role in graduate service-learning, we also recommend community partners take on a role as “co-educator.” Community partners clearly saw a value in graduate student work, but they appeared to default to a consumer role, as evidenced by their concern with the student product. While graduate students should produce something of benefit to the organization, community partners should be aware of their role as co-educators, which can entail aligning their needs with students’ educational goals, consistent communication and mentorship, and feedback that can enable student learning and professional growth.

Finally, we propose that faculty should take a “supporter,” rather than leadership, role in graduate service-learning. Faculty can help facilitate a successful relationship between student and community partner by ensuring that each understand and accept their role in the service-learning experience. While faculty can help make the initial match between student and community partner, they should allow graduate students to take the lead in negotiating the specific project. Furthermore, instead of determining the specifics of projects to be completed by students in conjunction with non-profit partners, instructors can provide a template (see appendix) to help enable a connection between course learning goals, student interests, and community partner need. Faculty should also engage students in the theories and concepts of their field by encouraging explicit connections in class discussion and written work such as journals.

Critical to the success of projects based on these roles are the touchpoints between when and how they connect. The student and community partner should work together in completing a project plan, engage in regular communication throughout the semester, and have a final wrap-up meeting. Students, through this process, utilize what they have mastered in their graduate studies, but also develop soft professional skills for work inside and outside of the academy. Faculty should continue to have regular communication with the community partners. Although the student and community partner should determine the specific project, faculty should share course learning goals with the community partner in ways that make sense to that community partner. Simply sharing the course syllabus will likely not be meaningful to the community partner and does not necessarily help the community partner view their role as
one of co-educator. Significantly, touchpoints reflect the necessity of ongoing communication throughout the process of project-based graduate service-learning.

**Limitations and Future Research**

A case study entails certain limitations, particularly as it relates to sample size and transferability. The graduate seminar we used as a case study was small, as is typical among graduate seminars, and, although the seminar was somewhat diverse (including doctoral, master's, and certificate students), further studies are needed to confirm our findings. Not only would research benefit from studying additional graduate students who are involved in service-learning, but it is beneficial to study a diverse set of graduate students with different goals and backgrounds, as well as project-based service-learning in different departments.

As noted throughout, our study was inspired in part by research which indicates that graduate students are increasingly seeking employment outside of the academy. The service-learning experience in our case study offered graduate students real-world application of scholarly knowledge in organizational contexts that theoretically provided opportunities for professional growth and skill development. This is something that warrants further study, especially as much of the service-learning literature in the communication field is focused on examining and enhancing the community partner and graduate student service-learning experience as it relates to social justice and activism, as opposed to career preparation and other practical benefits that can be realized through this type of civic engagement.

Additionally, our recommendations are speculative. Our research suggests that these recommendations can allow instructors to capture the benefits of project-based graduate service-learning while avoiding some of the pitfalls, but the next step is to study a course that employs these recommendations. Our hope is that the guidance provided offers a useful starting point for programs to implement project-based service-learning as a part of the graduate curriculum, with one of the goals being professional development and preparation for careers that may take the student beyond academia.

Finally, single semester, project-based placement with community partners is not the only form of service-learning. There are convincing arguments that multi-semester community-based scholarship and engagement is tremendously beneficial to both community-partners and students (Jay, 2010). However, not all programs have the capacity or desire to engage in such sustained service-learning, particularly for students who are being prepared for academic positions. Further, some community partners view semester-long projects as a manageable time investment for their agency and workload. While year-long, or multi-year, partnerships may be more impactful, our hope is that these recommendations provide a meaningful and practical alternative to the important service-learning work occurring in other contexts over longer timeframes.

**Conclusion**

Graduate student service-learning can be deeply influential for both students and community partners. However, our analysis suggests that graduate student learning operates most effectively when it deviates from some of the best practices for undergraduate service-learning. In particular, a university and community partner MOU has proven beneficial for undergraduate service-learning, but our study suggests that graduate service-learning should place students in a leadership role where they negotiate the terms of the specific project with the community partner, identifying both individual and shared goals to increase benefits and success. Similarly, while undergraduate service-learning involves a great deal of discovery, graduate service-learning appears to be guided by mastery, which necessitates a change in the participant roles as well as the particular experiences.

We have proposed recommendations that situate participants in unique roles, assigning leadership to graduate students as they navigate new partnerships. The template that we have provided in the appendix can be useful for helping instructors step away from their traditional role in the service-learning relationship, while ensuring that the experience fits with course learning objectives. Ideally, both students and community partners will leave the experience with a useful product, and the students will be able to gain a unique perspective on the relationships between theory and practice.

Academia is faced with an emerging challenge of graduate students who, by preference or necessity, will not stay in the academy. Likewise, graduate students who remain in the academy will be facing increasing pressures to justify their existence, necessitating new forms of community engagement and the ability to link academic theory to real-world practice. Project-based service-learning can be a useful tool for these very practical needs. Our graduate students may have responsibility for
the “intellectual treasures of the ages,” but we also need to provide those same students with the practical skills that can enable their success both inside and outside of the academy. We offer useful steps in that direction for project-based graduate service-learning that we hope will further the conversation for graduate education.

References


APPENDIX A: MOU Template (Used for this Particular Case Study)

TO:

FROM:

DATE:

This Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) sets the terms and understanding between [Community Partner] and [University].

**Background of Course**

[Overview of course; details of the course learning objectives]

**Purpose of the Service-Learning Partnership**

[Proposed purpose for both Community Partner and Student]

*The above goals will be accomplished by undertaking the following activities:*

[List of agreed upon goals]

**Reporting**

[Process of Community Partner and Student updates on status of project]

**Duration and Terms**

[Length of partnership; additional terms as needed]
APPENDIX B: Community Partner/Graduate Student Service-Learning Project Agreement

*(NOTE: Graduate student will take template into launch meeting to be completed in conjunction with community partner/co-educator)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Learning Objective(s)</th>
<th>Graduate Student Objective(s)</th>
<th>Community Partner Objective(s)</th>
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Description of Project: *(NOTE: Scope of project and deliverable)*
### Integration/Communication Plan:
*(NOTE: Training, Meeting dates, Organizational events for graduate student to attend, Time expectations for responses to emails etc.)*

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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### Presentation Plan:
*(NOTE: This section will outline graduate student/community partner agreement on when project should be completed and how it will be presented)*

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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### Wrap up meeting date:

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