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The Efficacy of Using Service Learning to Teach about Social Justice Issues in the US Cultural Sector

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Abstract: Over the last seven years, the US sector primarily concerned with arts and culture has increasingly focused on social justice issues. However, scholars have rarely empirically examined if and how arts management educators teach about social justice issues. Therefore, this participant-oriented evaluation investigated the efficacy of using service learning with a culturally specific arts organization to teach graduate students about social justice issues. Based on an analysis of the quantitative data, this evaluative study determined that service learning with a culturally specific arts organization is an effective approach to teach graduate students about social justice issues, as well as principles of socially responsible arts administration. Given the results, this study has implications for graduate curricula and experiential education in arts administration.

Keywords: Arts Administration, Arts Management, Service Learning, Social Justice, Teaching and Learning

Introduction

In 2017, Cuyler surveyed arts administration educators to determine if they included diversity issues in instruction. Although the study found that 86 percent of educators taught about diversity issues, only 23 percent reported using service learning in the teaching of these issues. Furthermore, an international survey found that 68 percent of arts administration students considered an internship more valuable than a service learning project (Cuyler and Hodges 2015). Yet scholars have confirmed the educational benefits of using service learning to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Bright, Bright, and Haley 2007; Carpenter 2011; Carpenter and Krist 2011; Furco 1996; National Survey of Student Engagement 2016; Tennenbaum and Berrett 2005). Furthermore, research has shown the benefits students gain when educators use service learning to teach social justice education, such as students' awareness and understanding of complexities confronting the increase of diverse populations (Carlan and Rubin 2005; Good 2005; Rice and Horn 2014; and Parkinson, Roden, and Sciame-Giesecke 2009).

Though the Association of Arts Administration Educators (AAAE) (2014) has encouraged educators to teach about the impact of demographic diversity on managing cultural organizations and competencies relative to the impact of the global economy, AAAE has provided no guidance to educators pursuing these goals. Furthermore, AAAE has only recently convened a Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion (DEI) taskforce that might assist educators in their pursuit of teaching about social justice issues in arts administration classrooms. Because the use of service learning is beneficial to students in learning about social justice issues and current scholarship on the teaching of social justice issues in arts administration is remiss of service learning's potential to enhance students' knowledge of social justice issues (Cuyler 2013, 2017; Heidelberg and Cuyler 2014), arts administration educators could benefit greatly from empirical research that evaluates the efficacy of using service learning with a culturally specific arts organization to teach about social justice issues. Therefore, the researcher conducted this study to fill the gap. He used a participant-oriented evaluation longitudinal survey design to investigate the primary research question: is service learning with a culturally specific arts organization an effective approach to teach graduate students about social justice issues in the cultural sector? A secondary question this study sought to answer is: does service learning with a culturally specific arts organization help to improve graduate students' understanding of Keller's (1989) principles of socially responsible arts administration?

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The Arts in Community Engagement

The Department of Art Education at Florida State University (FSU) began offering ARE 5253, “Arts in Community Service,” in 1983. The author first taught the course in the spring of 2013. In 2014, the curriculum committee approved a proposal to change the course title to “Arts in Community Engagement.” The course description states that the course introduces students to the practice and theory of arts-based community engagement.

By the end of the course, the author aims for students to have the ability to (1) understand and cogently discuss the practice and theory of arts-based community engagement, (2) develop competence in the practice of socially responsible arts administration through serving and learning with a local culturally specific arts organization, (3) critically analyze their learning by questioning their unique paths to achieving the course learning outcomes, and (4) demonstrate the professionalism expected of a practicing arts administrator. Four texts provide most of the course content (Borwick 2012; Borwick 2015; Cole 2008; Korza, Brown, and Dreezen 2007). In addition to teaching students how to conceptualize, design, and evaluate arts-based community engagement projects, the course also explores social identities and privilege, implicit bias, civil liberties, criminal justice, education, the environment, HIV/Aids, human rights, police brutality, and poverty, among other social justice issues.

The fifteen-week course has five assignments. These include fifty hours of service learning worth 50 percent of the students’ grade, an arts-based community engagement project (15%), a course reflection paper (10%), a presentation (10%), and professionalism (15%). Students earn their professionalism grade by coming to class on time, dressed appropriately and prepared to participate in course activities. Qualitatively, students’ course reflection papers have indicated that they have benefitted tremendously from completing forty-to-fifty hours of service learning with a local culturally specific arts organization. These organizations culturally serve people of color, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ people through their missions but have specific managerial challenges related to audience development, fundraising, and space acquisition (Matlon, Haastrecht, and Mengüç 2014; Voss et al. 2016).

Through their service with culturally specific arts organizations, students have deepened their knowledge about specific areas of arts administration, including program evaluation, designing educational programs, developing branding and logo campaigns, raising funds, and writing grants, among other managerial tasks. In addition, students have learned the value of their work when serving with culturally specific arts organizations that in most cases have very limited capacity to fulfill their missions due to systemic marginalization. Until now, however, no evaluation of the efficacy of using service learning to teach about social justice issues has existed (Cuyler 2013, 2017; Heidelberg and Cuyler 2014). This study aims to determine the efficacy of using service learning with a culturally specific arts organization to teach about social justice issues.

Service Learning

Service learning is different from other types of experiential education because, theoretically, it equally benefits the provider and recipient of the service. However, to provide educational value to students, instructors who use service learning must provide some academic context and design service learning in a way that ensures that the service enhances the learning and the learning enhances the service (Furco 1996). This was especially important in the implementation of service learning in the Arts in Community Engagement because as Table 1 shows, it was the first time that 72 percent of students who took the class experienced service learning as a part of a course.

Table 1: First-Time Service Learners

Criterion	%
No	28%
Yes	72%

Source: Cuyler 2018

In using service learning, the author remains cognizant of best practices in implementing service learning in “Arts in Community Engagement” to ensure the best possible educational experience for students. Tannenbaum and Berrett (2005, 2) articulated the following as characteristics of effective service learning: “(1) service that is connected to the curriculum; (2) service involving a specific action; (3) student reflection at the end of the service; (4) ongoing reflection throughout the course; (5) student's choice in selecting the service; (6) student training in the service area; (7) student involvement for a minimum of 10 hours; (8) faculty training in the use of service-learning; (9) ongoing communication between the faculty member and community service-learning partner; (10) assessment to determine if program outcomes were achieved; and (11) recognition of student contributions.” While the author used these best practices in implementing service learning in the Arts in Community Engagement course, using service learning with culturally specific arts organizations to teach graduate students about social justice issues could have done more harm than good if managed poorly.

Martin, Seblanka, and Tryon (2009) discussed that time is the greatest challenge to short-term service learning. They explained that perceptions of students’ commitment to the organization and conflicts between the school and organizations’ calendars can cause service learning experiences to go awry. Beyond time—specifically, when using service learning to teach about social justice issues—students can easily fall into blaming the victims (Hollis 2004); in this case, culturally specific arts organizations. Including service learning in the “Arts in Community Engagement” course has been critical to challenging negative attitudes about these organizations, especially since they are vital to a city’s arts ecology (White 2018). Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007), Freire (1970), and Rendón (2009) provide the philosophical foundation for using service learning with a culturally specific arts organization in the teaching of social justice issues in “Arts in Community Engagement.”

Philosophical/Theoretical Foundations

Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007, 1) define social justice as “both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all social groups in a society mutually shaped to meet their needs....Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live.” To achieve social justice in the cultural sector by practicing socially responsible Arts Administration, Keller (1989, 52–53) argued that arts managers must “(1)

become active participants in the liberation of cultural groups that have been excluded from cultural opportunities because of inappropriate evaluation of their merit based on class, disability, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, (2) remain in contact with leaders who have personal experience with cultural marginalization to remedy this issue, (3) support activism in communities where past exclusionary patterns have established cultural inequities, and (4) remain aware of monopolies in the cultural sector and develop compensatory responses to these barriers to public entry.” Students should critically reflect on and commit to using these practices in their work.

In defining critical reflection, Freire (1970, 66) asserts that “action will constitute an authentic praxis (practice) only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection.” He also argues that “praxis consists of both action and reflection. If there is reflection with no action, it constitutes verbalism, while action absent of reflection constitutes activism” (87). Thus, to encourage graduate students’ development into social justice allies who understand privilege and implicit bias and how they impede the acquisition of social justice, students need practice engaging with groups that have historically been excluded from cultural opportunities. They also need meaningful interactions with leaders who have personal experience with marginalization. Without these unique educational experiences, students will remain incapable of becoming social justice allies (Edwards 2006).

Furthermore, Rendón (2009) insists that for educators to promote critical reflection in the classroom they need to use contemplative pedagogy that centers upon a socially engaged spirituality. When educators encourage students to bring their “whole” self, meaning both their intellectual and emotional selves, to the educational experience and they engage with social justice they increase the likelihood of making progress in their self-development towards social justice allies. They achieve this while working to eradicate social ills and advancing the collective good (Rice and Horn 2014). Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007), Freire (1970), and Rendón (2009) philosophically and theoretically solidify service learning’s utility in teaching graduate students about social justice issues and advancing their transformation into effective arts managers and social justice allies simultaneously.

Method

The author used Qualtrics survey software to develop a confidential, online, eight-minute, sixteen-question survey. In addition to asking about students’ demographic information, he asked about their previous experience with service learning and their assessment of the extent that service learning helped them to understand Keller’s (1989) principles for socially responsible arts administration. The survey also asked about their perceptions of whether service learning with a culturally specific arts organization helped them to better understand social justice issues. Over five semester offerings of “Arts in Community Engagement,” approximately thirty-three graduate students have enrolled in the course. Initially, the author allowed students to select the cultural organization they wanted to serve. When asked for suggestions, he often encouraged students to serve with culturally specific arts organizations. In the past two iterations of the course, students only served instructor-selected culturally specific arts organizations to ensure their service had community and educational value. Of the thirty-three students who enrolled in the course, twenty-seven completed service learning placements with culturally specific arts organizations. Twenty-five students completed the survey for a response rate of 93 percent.

The author followed best practices for conducting surveys by opening and disseminating the survey on Monday April 3, 2017, and closing the survey on Monday April 17, 2017, at five o’clock p.m. He also sent students two reminder emails within the two weeks to encourage the largest response rate possible. However, two limitations existed for the study. First, his role as the instructor and the researcher may have impacted students’ responses to the survey. In addition, 56 percent of the students had either interned, volunteered, or worked with a culturally specific arts organization before taking the course. Students’ previous experiences with culturally

specific arts organizations may have impacted the survey results; however, the researcher reminded students to “think only about the service learning experience in the ‘Arts in Community Engagement’ course” when answering the survey questions. Though these two limitations existed, the results shed light on the efficacy of using service learning with a culturally specific arts organization to teach graduate students about social justice issues.

Results

At the time that they took the course, 60 percent of students majored in arts administration in the Department of Art Education, and 16 percent majored in arts administration in the College of Music. The remaining students majored in classics, dance, information studies/library science, museum education and visitor-centered exhibitions, and religion. Demographically, 92 percent of the students identified as Millennials, while only 8 percent identified as Generation X. Not one student identified as differently abled. In terms of ethnicity, although there were a few students of color, most identified as white; none identified as an Indigenous person or Middle Eastern. Most students identified as cisgender female while fewer identified as cisgender male or gender non-conforming. No student identified as transgender female or male. Lastly, almost all students identified as heterosexual. Very few students identified as asexual, and no students identified as LGBQS+.

Students completed their service learning placements with the African Caribbean Dance Theatre, Asian Coalition of Tallahassee, John G. Riley House Museum, Journey to Dance, Mickee Faust, Mission San Luis, Southside Arts Complex, and World Ballet. Table 2 indicates that through their service learning placements, students interacted with people from a variety of backgrounds, but most often with African/black Americans and Asian Americans. Those who chose “other” reported interacting with white and elderly people.

Table 2: Social Groups Interacted With During Service Learning

Social Group	Count
African/Black Americans	11
Asian/Asian Americans	11
LGBTQS+ People	5
Differently Abled People	5
LatinX People	5
Other	2

Source: Cuyler 2018

Social Justice and Service Learning

When asked “To what extent do you agree that service learning helped you to understand the following?” Table 3 shows that 48 percent strongly agreed and agreed that service learning helped them understand challenges culturally specific arts organizations face while pursuing their missions. Only 4 percent strongly disagreed. More than half, 60 percent, strongly agreed that service learning helped them to understand the need for arts administrators to become active participants in the liberation of cultural groups that have been excluded from cultural opportunities because of inappropriate evaluation of their merit based on class, disability, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Only 36 percent agreed, and 4 percent strongly disagreed.

Regarding the need for arts administrators to remain in contact with leaders who have personal experience with cultural marginalization to remedy this issue, 60 percent strongly agreed, 32 percent agreed, 4 percent disagreed, and 4 percent strongly disagreed. Approximately 76 percent strongly agreed that service learning helped them understand the need for arts administrators to support activism in communities where past exclusionary patterns have established cultural inequities. Only 20 percent agreed, and 4 percent strongly disagreed. More than half, 52 percent, strongly agreed that service learning helped them understand the need for arts administrators to remain aware of monopolies in the cultural sector and work to develop compensatory responses to these barriers to public entry. While 36 percent agreed, 8 percent disagreed, and 4 percent strongly disagreed. Finally, 64 percent strongly agreed that, overall, service learning with a culturally specific arts organization enhanced their knowledge of social justice issues in the cultural sector. Just 32 percent agreed, and 4 percent strongly disagreed.

Table 3: Assessment of Keller’s Principles of Socially Responsible Arts Administration

Competencies	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
The efficacy of using service learning to teach about social justice issues in the US cultural sector	48%	48%	0%	4%	25
The need for arts administrators to become active participants in the liberation of cultural groups that have been excluded from cultural opportunities because of inappropriate evaluation of their merit based on class, disability, ethnicity, or sexual orientation	60%	36%	0%	4%	25
The need for arts administrators to remain in contact with leaders who have personal experience with cultural marginalization to remedy this issue	60%	32%	4%	4%	25
The need for arts administrators to support activism in communities where past exclusionary patterns have established cultural inequities	76%	20%	0%	4%	25
The need for arts administrators to remain aware of monopolies in the cultural sector and work to develop compensatory responses to these barriers to public entry	52%	36%	8%	4%	25
Overall, service learning with a culturally specific arts organization enhanced my knowledge of social justice issues in the cultural sector.	64%	32%	0%	4%	25

Source: Keller 1989

Beyond the assessment of Keller’s (1989) principles and service learning’s utility in teaching about social justice issues in the cultural sector, Table 4 displays the additional benefits students gained from service learning with a culturally specific arts organization. More than half of students reported gaining most of the benefits, including cultural awareness; the ability to work with people different from themselves; a better understanding of the importance of creating social awareness; a better understanding of the adverse impacts of privilege on culturally specific arts organizations; future advocacy for institutional diversity initiatives in organizations in which they may work; cultural sensitivity; interest in ending discrimination, exclusion, inequity, marginalization, and oppression; cultural competency; and learning about a different art form or culture other than their own. Less than half, 36 percent, reported gaining complex thinking skills. The one person who chose Other reported that they were able to immerse themselves in Tallahassee’s cultural life.

Table 4: Educational Benefits of Service Learning with a Culturally Specific Arts Organization

Educational Benefit	%	Count
Cultural awareness	80%	20
The ability to work with people who are different from me	76%	19
A better understanding of the importance of creating social awareness	72%	18
A better understanding of the adverse impacts of privilege on culturally specific arts organizations.	64%	16
Future advocacy for institutional diversity initiatives in organizations in which I work	64%	16
Cultural sensitivity	60%	15
Interest in ending discrimination, exclusion, inequity, marginalization, and oppression	60%	15
Cultural competency	56%	14
I learned about a different art form or culture.	56%	14
Complex thinking skills	36%	9
Other	4%	1

Source: Cuyler 2018

Conclusions

This study answered the research question “Is service learning with a culturally specific arts organization an effective approach to teach graduate students about social justice issues?” and the secondary research question “Does service learning with a culturally specific arts organization help to improve graduate students’ understanding of Keller’s (1989) principles of socially responsible arts administration?” Though considered an effective approach to engage undergraduates in their learning (National Survey on Student Engagement 2016), clearly service learning with a culturally specific arts organization is also an effective approach to teach graduate students about social justice issues. However, educators considering using the approach described in this study should remain cognizant of three key issues.

First, educators must assess the host organization’s readiness to host a service learner. As stated previously, culturally specific arts organizations’ capacity, finances, and space acquisition may impact their ability to provide an “ideal” educational experience for students (Matlon, Haastrecht, and Mengüç 2014; Voss et al. 2016). In addition, this may require the educator to

assist organizations in understanding the differences between interns, service learners, and volunteers. Table 3 showed that one student's service learning experience did not help them to better understand the social justice competencies assessed. This is likely due to a poor choice of placement. Educators should work closely with potential host organizations and discuss their readiness to a host service learner. This could include having organizations answer questions about their ability to mentor students, willingness to respond promptly to student inquiries, and preferred methods of communications.

Second, educators should work closely with both organizations and students to provide meaningful projects that will enhance the service learning experience. When the author asked, "What would have improved your service learning experience?" one respondent commented, "a specific project to work on or role in the organization. Instead of being an extra hand to just complete random tasks." While the organization benefitted from having the student complete these tasks, the student does not perceive that they benefitted from completing these tasks directly. In the assessment of organizations' readiness, educators should also ask organizations to identify projects that students could complete within a semester's time that will enhance their ability to fulfill their mission. Educators using the approach described in this study with undergraduates should also consider allowing students to serve in teams. This may enhance and increase the acquisition of knowledge for students. Finally, educators should assist students' preparedness to serve and learn by providing them an intensive orientation to service learning (Tennenbaum and Berrett 2005).

Although this study answered its primary and secondary research questions, additional research questions emerged as a result of this study. Future studies should use a phenomenological design to assess if students' engagement with people who are different from them during service learning with a culturally specific arts organization negatively, positively, or neither negatively or positively enhanced their perceptions of those people. Considering the suggestion to educators to use team-based learning for undergraduates, researchers should examine service learning's efficacy in teaching social justice issues, especially if diversity exist among the student teams. Researchers should also investigate if socially privileged (abled-bodied, Christian, white, male, heterosexual, or economically advantaged) students benefit more from social justice education than their less privileged counterparts. More importantly, the discipline of arts administration should consider how this study bolsters its efforts to encourage educators to teach students about the impact of demographic diversity and multiculturalism on managing cultural organizations and thus assist students' transformations into socially responsible arts administrators.

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