In this study we evaluated the impact of experiential learning activities (class projects, research projects, internships, community-based projects, independent study, etc.) organized by the IUPUI Solution Center on Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) students and faculty members. Students and faculty members were invited to participate in online surveys to evaluate how these experiences affected their opportunities for networking and collaboration, and improving their academic productivity; and management partners organizational capacities and productivity. Results are based on the perceptions of the populations involved in these experiences.

The evaluation design was Mixed Sequential Explanatory (Creswell, 2008), combining the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data, and then triangulation. Quantitative data was collected through online surveys and, where appropriate, open ended question included in the information surveys and focus groups with students, faculty members and community partners.

The IUPUI Solution Center facilitates engagement opportunities between IUPUI’s community of scholars, researchers, and students and Indiana’s business, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations to help students enhance their academic development, and improve their employability. The Center intends to positively impact on:

- Students’ academic and future career development, by increasing student’s possibilities to develop leadership skills
- Faculty members’ professional development, by increasing their opportunities to develop connections with the community and collaborations with IUPSI faculty
- Partners’ organizational and professional development, by increasing their opportunities to build new informational and strengthen business networks, and by creating new partnerships, programs, and opportunities

The evaluation was conducted from January 2011 to December 2011, and included surveys completed by 73% of the 551 students and 69% of the 110 faculty members that participated in experiential learning coordinated by the Solution Center in 2011. The survey used Likert scales and asked questions about the students’ and faculty members’ perceptions of the experiences coordinated by the Solution Center.

Faculty members participating in experiences coordinated by the Solution Center believe that collaborating in community projects with the Solution Center might increase their community awareness. Students said that these experiences improved their academic productivity and that they can get a good job reference.

Of the students who partook in the study, 90% declared that the experience facilitated by the IUPUISC provided them with opportunities to develop leadership skills.

students’ academic development & employability

Students expressed that the experience facilitated by the Solution Center:

- Helped them develop job skills (85%), and check their expectations about their success (85%).
- Helped them to get introduced to career-related people (60%), and to increase their ability to solve the community’s needs (65%).
- Was useful to understand the importance of networking with employers (80%) and to effectively make professional contacts to support their career goals (80%).
- Helped them strengthen their professional skills and gain more experience (95%).
- Provided them with opportunities to develop leadership skills (90%), and connect theoretical learning to their practice during the internship.
- Helped them to better define their vocational interests and understand what they want or not to be professional.

None of the students considered that these experiences affected their decision to seek a higher degree.

methodology

The evaluation design was Mixed Sequential Explanatory (Creswell, 2008), combining the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data, and then triangulation. Quantitative data was collected through online surveys and, where appropriate, open ended question included in the information surveys and focus groups with students, faculty members and community partners.

academic development

Students believed that after the experience they are better prepared for a job (80.6%) and that they can get a good job reference (96.7%).

employability

Students believed that after the experience they are better prepared for a job (80.6%) and that they can get a good job reference (96.7%).

finding a job

46% said to have been offered a job at the organization where they interned, and 97% said that they had been offered a job at another organization.

facultty networking

Faculty members participating in experiences coordinated by the Solution Center believe that these experiences increase their opportunities to strengthen connections with community organizations; to meet other IUPUI faculty members and faculty in the academic productivity. However, collaboration with peer institutions directly affected by their participation in projects with the Solution Center.

They also believe that collaborating in community projects with the Solution Center might increase their community awareness, allowing them to learn about community organizations’ needs and to understand their specific needs that they could address and did not know about.

“Of the people who partook in the study, 90% declared that their experience facilitated by the IUPUISC provided them with opportunities to develop leadership skills.”

community development

Community partners agreed that getting involved in these experiences help them better meet their goals (85%).

75% stated that identifying a positive perspective in their organizations, and 75% believe that these experiences improve their organization’s productivity.

Assumptions can be made that a positive effect on organization might eventually have a positive impact on the local economy.

References


Bach & Weinzimmer, 2011; Gault; Leach and Duey, 2010; Walker II, 2011; Keen & Baldwin, 2004).

3. Results were also consistent with studies about how these experiences open opportunities:
- For faculty members, to build relationships with external agencies, Shaw & Baldwin, using 1987 data.
- For community partners, to access useful information, build networks, and take new perspectives into their organizations, promoting organizational development and the development of new products and services (Shaw & Baldwin, 2004).
- The mixed methodology used in the study allowed to:
- Identify (students, as well as instructors), select, and utilize the effects, which is difficult to identify using only qualitative techniques.
- Identify best practices and sense for improvement, based on the information of the major and minor areas of impact of the program.
- Provide reflection and discussion among respondents about the real benefits of these experiences.

3. Further evaluation should lead to:
- Developing a way for evaluating student learning outcomes for experiential learning that support the data collected.
- Further evaluation practices with IUPUI Career Services Council and determine data usage to improve services.
- Ensure possibilities for regional evaluation with community partners.
- Partners with peer institutions to assess the impact of student internships on urban and metropolitan areas.

Lessons learned

- Partner with peer institutions to assess the impact of student internships on urban and metropolitan areas.
- Develop a way for evaluating student learning outcomes for experiential learning that support the data collected.
- Further evaluation practices with IUPUI Career Services Council and determine data usage to improve services.
- Ensure possibilities for regional evaluation with community partners.
- Partners with peer institutions to assess the impact of student internships on urban and metropolitan areas.

“Faculty members participating in experiences coordinated […] also believe that collaborating in community projects with the Solution Center might increase their community awareness…”

“Facts are the things that are true and that people can agree on. Opinions are things that people have feelings about and are not necessarily true...”

Due to the nature of the Center’s mission, it is impossible to evaluate the exact impact of its programs on the academic and professional development of its participants. However, the Center has taken steps to collect data on the outcomes of its programs, and to use that data to improve its programs and services.