Assessing the Value to Client Organizations of Student Practicum Projects

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ABSTRACT
Public policy and public administration degree programs often require students to gain real-world training by working on practicum projects with client organizations. Whereas past literature has focused largely on the impact of these projects on students, we examine their impact on the client organizations. The results are based on surveys of government agencies and nonprofits that participated in the Public Policy Practicum Program at Stanford University. Clients reported that the students’ work was high quality, policy recommendations were helpful, and projects positively impacted their organizations. The clients’ satisfaction can largely be attributed to four program design elements: consulting-based course design, appropriate projects, close faculty involvement, and regular client feedback. We discuss the generalizability of our results, and the adaptability of this program to other institutions. We hope our study helps other institutions avoid common challenges for client organizations that participate in service-learning courses.

KEY WORDS
Practicum, client organizations, partner organizations, public policy
Both the number and type of service-learning opportunities offered by colleges and universities have grown substantially over the last couple of decades. Service learning has also become fundamental to numerous academic and professional degree programs. Many master’s programs in public policy (MPP) and public administration (MPA) offer service learning through practicum experiences, in which students use their skills to conduct analyses for government or nonprofit organizations (Garris, Madden, & Rodgers, 2008).

Students report various benefits from their practicum experiences, including increased course satisfaction, policy analysis and general professional skills, and dedication to community involvement (Bernstein, Ohren, & Shue, 2003; Turner, 2014; Villanueva, Hovinga, & Cass, 2011; Whitaker & Berner, 2004). Practica have also been shown to benefit students after graduation by helping with their job searches, informing their career paths, and improving skills that they use in their jobs (Sprague & Percy, 2014). In studies of a broader range of service-learning offerings, researchers find that service learning positively affects many components of students’ learning outcomes, personal and professional development, and academic and civic engagement (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

The literature has focused less on the experiences of client organizations participating in service-learning courses. However, in measuring practicum success, it is essential to determine the effect of practica on participating organizations as these courses are expected to benefit them as well as students. Client satisfaction also provides academic programs with a valuable indicator of how useful the academic training they provide is to employers.

In this article, we examine the value to client organizations of practicum projects conducted by undergraduate and graduate students in Stanford University’s Public Policy Practicum Program. After discussing previous work on client experiences with service-learning courses, we describe the practicum program and our study design. We then examine the clients’ satisfaction with the practicum projects and their views of the projects’ usefulness and impact. In the next section, we identify program elements that help explain the program’s success. After addressing areas for improvement, we discuss the generalizability of our results and the adaptability of this program to other institutions. We hope our study helps administrators and instructors avoid common problems for clients with service-learning courses, so their courses can better serve both client and student needs.

LITERATURE ON CLIENT PERSPECTIVES ON SERVICE LEARNING
Studies have shown that client organizations benefit from their involvement in practicum courses. Organizations that worked with MPA and Master of Urban Planning students at New York University’s Wagner School reported that the students’ work was helpful, and it was even more valuable if it provided them with new tools or resources (Schachter & Schwartz, 2009). At the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, almost all client organizations implemented at least half of the recommendations made by teams of Master in Public Policy and Administration students (Bushouse, 2005). Clients also remarked on the high quality and usefulness of practicum projects conducted by MPA student teams at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Whitaker & Berner, 2004). Among practitioners who supervised MPA capstone projects conducted by individual students at Binghamton University in New York, most
indicated that the projects achieved the goals they hoped the projects would achieve (Campbell & Lambright, 2011).

Organizations working with degree programs other than public administration report satisfaction with their practicum experiences as well. In a survey of organizations partnering with the University of San Diego’s Nonprofit Leadership and Management master’s degree program, clients noted that their organizations’ programs and services improved as a result of the collaboration (Krasynska, Jones, & Schumann, 2013). Organizations also benefitted from team practicum projects produced for them in political science and urban affairs courses at Eastern Michigan University and Wright State University in Ohio (Bernstein et al., 2003, Killian, 2004).

Agencies also report positive experiences with other forms of service learning, such as direct service and community-based research. Organizations that partnered with DePaul University’s service-learning program indicated that the benefits outweighed the challenges (Worrall, 2007). For organizations involved with a variety of service-learning courses at Indiana University, the partnerships were considered “generally a net positive” (Blouin & Perry, 2009, p. 132). Community service agencies with service-learning experience in a rural northwestern state found the students to be effective in helping them meet agency goals (Vernon & Ward, 1999). In addition, organizations in Indiana believe that short-term volunteers are worth the effort (Gazley, Bennett, & Littlepage, 2013).

Organizations identify a range of specific benefits they receive from participating in practicum courses and other service-learning experiences. Clients appreciate the extra resources the students provide in many forms, such as providing their organization with direct service hours or conducting analyses for them (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Bushouse, 2005; Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Sandy & Holland, 2006; Shinnamom, & Connors, 1998; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Students’ new ideas and outside perspectives are also considered beneficial (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Gelmon et al., 1998; Schachter & Schwartz, 2009; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Many organizations value the students’ energy and skills (Gelmon et al., 1998; Vernon & Ward, 1999) and view them as good role models (Vernon & Ward, 1999; Worrall, 2007). Some clients are motivated to participate in service-learning partnerships to teach students and share their expertise with them (Gelmon et al., 1998; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007).

Participating agencies also specify various challenges with their service-learning experiences. Clients report that students are sometimes unprepared, unreliable, unprofessional, and disinterested (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Vernon & Ward 1999; Worrall, 2007). Difficulties also arise from the academic calendar and students’ busy schedules and short-term commitments (Vernon & Ward, 1999; Worrall, 2007). Some faculty and other university personnel do not sufficiently involve or communicate with partner organizations to make sure the organization’s needs and interests are being met (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Gazley et al., 2013; Gelmon et al., 1998; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Agencies also report that the time and resources they must commit to certain service-learning experiences are burdensome, sometimes outweighing the benefits (Blouin & Perry, 2009; s, 2005; Vernon & Ward, 1999).
Past studies discuss various ways that these obstacles have been addressed in service-learning courses or could be addressed in the future (Allard and Straussman 2003; Blouin and Perry 2009, Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Gazley et al., 2013; Gelmon et al., 1998; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Shea & Weiss, 2013; Vernon & Ward, 1999). Many researchers suggest that clients’ needs and interests would be better met if faculty and other university personnel involved clients more in the planning and execution of practica and other service-learning courses. Problems with some service-learning courses, such as burdensome demands on client resources, are partially addressed by having consulting-based practicum courses as opposed to other types of service-learning courses (Bushouse, 2005; Shea & Weiss, 2013).

**STANFORD’S PUBLIC POLICY PRACTICUM PROGRAM**

Stanford University’s Public Policy Program offers practicum courses for both its undergraduate and graduate students. With a few exceptions, all of the students are full-time, traditional students. The one-quarter undergraduate practicum course was instituted in 2006-07. It was originally optional but is now required for all seniors majoring in Public Policy who are not writing an honors thesis. Seniors can choose to take it during any quarter. Different instructors teach the course each quarter, but the director of the undergraduate practicum program assists them to help maintain consistency in the course across quarters. The two-quarter graduate practicum course began in 2008-09. It is required for second-year students in the MPP degree program and is optional for students in the MA in Public Policy degree program. Until 2012-13, students in the MA in International Policy Studies degree program also took the graduate practicum course. Aided by a teaching assistant, the same professor has directed the graduate practicum program and taught its graduate course for the last six years. The Public Policy Program provided course construction funds for the creation of the graduate practicum course.

The practicum courses are structured to enable students to improve and apply their policy analysis and general professional skills. Students enter the practicum after completing most of their required coursework in economics, statistics, political science, organizational behavior, law, and other social sciences. Using the analytical tools they have learned, students work in teams to conduct policy-related projects requested by nonprofit and government organizations. Students are assigned to teams of 3-6 students based on their skills and preferences among the projects for the course. The courses have varied in size from five to 25 students, or one to six teams.

The course revolves around the projects. Students receive guidance and feedback on the projects from the instructor regularly and from the client at least three times during the course. Instructors review drafts of all client deliverables. The project culminates in a written report for their client and two presentations. All students present their findings to their client and give another presentation to Public Policy faculty, staff and students. Along with client deliverables, students have additional assignments, such as policy analysis readings, project design assignments, teambuilding exercises, status report memos, and reflection papers. While much of the class time is devoted to discussing the projects, some classes focus on general topics that should help students develop their skills and carry out their projects. For a more detailed description of the undergraduate practicum course, see Sprague and Percy (2014).

**Clients and Projects**

All Stanford practicum client organizations are government or nonprofit institutions. Their
geographic focus ranges from the local to international level. Approximately 40% of past projects were conducted for government agencies and 60% for nonprofits. Examples of former client organizations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Examples of Former Client Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government Agencies</th>
<th>Nonprofit Organizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local: City of Palo Alto, Mountain View Whisman</td>
<td>Local: Joint Venture Silicon Valley, Prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District</td>
<td>University Project, Silicon Valley Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State: California’s Public Utilities Commission,</td>
<td>State: California Competes, California Clean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California State Assembly’s Select Committee on</td>
<td>Energy Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine</td>
<td>National: Comeback America Initiative, National Center for State Courts, Natural Resources Defense Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government Accountability Office</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International: The World Bank</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process for choosing client organizations and projects has evolved over time. Initially, the practicum program directors and instructors sought out organizations recommended by Stanford faculty and staff. As organizations learned about the practicum program through word of mouth, some contacted it with their project ideas. Instructors have also sought out organizations that would likely have projects that matched student interests. Most organizations that are contacted are enthusiastic about being a client, but sometimes they decline due to time or staffing constraints. To obtain proposals more systematically, the practicum program recently created an online form that clients can use to submit project ideas. The program tends to receive more projects than the 10-12 projects usually needed per year, so the projects that garner the most student interest are chosen.

All projects must enable the students to apply their interdisciplinary training in the social sciences. Students also need to be able to delve deep enough into the issue in one or two quarters such that they can conduct an original, rigorous, and meaningful analysis of it. Projects do not need to be primarily quantitative or qualitative. Although students have been trained to analyze any policy topic, the topic should be one in which the client organization has both a stake in and the ability to affect the issue based on the students’ work. Projects tend to involve determining the shape and/or potential solutions to a policy problem, evaluating an existing policy or program, or creating a new program initiative. Examples of past projects include assessing the fiscal health of California’s public employee pension systems for the California Governor’s Office, evaluating a childcare subsidy pilot program for United Way Bay Area, and helping develop a sustainability plan for the City of Palo Alto.

Before the course begins, the instructor helps clients refine their projects if necessary to meet the course requirements. He or she also provides the client with a course syllabus and explains the
expectations for the students, client organizations, and instructor. During the course, the instructor’s interactions with the client tend to be limited, but the instructor is always available to address any client questions or concerns. Instructors will also contact clients with any concerns that warrant the clients’ attention. Some instructors also informally check in with clients and attend the students’ client meetings.

Clients have contact with the students at least three times throughout the course. Depending on the client’s location, these interactions may be in person, by phone, or through videoconferencing. To help facilitate these meetings, some instructors set them up before the course begins. Due to variation in the clients’ interests and the nature of the projects, teams may have different amounts of contact with their clients. The client provides background information on the project and answers any student questions at the introductory meeting. Midway through the course, the students update their clients and receive the clients’ feedback on their progress and proposed remaining steps. The students provide the client with a final report at the end of the course. In some cases, clients provide feedback on drafts of the final reports. Students also give a presentation of their results to the client organization and anyone the client invites.

Although students work with their clients to better understand the issues, access information sources, and help ensure that their work will be useful, the students’ final reports are to represent their own, non-partisan policy analysis. Reports are made publicly available on the Public Policy Program’s website. After the project is completed, clients are asked to fill out an evaluation of their experience. They currently do not pay to participate in the program.

**DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

To assess the value of practicum projects from the client organization’s perspective, we conducted an online survey of participating client organizations between 2007-2013. A total of 49 practicum projects were conducted for 37 different organizations during this time period. Three client contacts worked on more than one practicum project within the organization, but they were asked to fill out a separate survey for each project. The clients received the survey between the fall of 2011 and 2013, depending on when the project was completed. Two follow-up e-mails were also sent. To give clients some time to observe a project’s impact, surveys were not sent until at least four months after project completion. Of the 49 project contacts, 42 participated in the survey, for a total response rate of 86%. Of those who participated, only four respondents did not fully complete the survey. Of the seven non-responding client contacts, four had left the client organization.

We used the client survey by Schachter & Schwartz (2009) as a template for our survey. Our 30-question survey consisted of questions about the impact of the practicum project and the client’s overall experience with the practicum team and program. Most closed-ended questions used a 5-point Likert scale. The lowest rating of “1” represented the most negative responses (e.g., “Very poor quality”), and the highest rating of “5” indicated the most positive responses (e.g., “Excellent quality”). The middle rating of “3” included responses, such as “Satisfactory” and “Somewhat satisfied.” These rankings were used to compute mean ratings and the distribution of responses. We also conducted a qualitative analysis of the clients’ free-response answers.

The surveys were not anonymous, and some clients had worked on projects supervised by the
lead researcher. Consequently, some clients may have reported more positive results than actually observed, exhibiting social desirability bias (Paulhus, 1984). In addition, they may have positively biased their ratings in the hopes of partnering with the program again. While these factors could have affected how clients rated their satisfaction with their experience, they are less likely to affect more factual questions, such as whether the project’s recommendations were implemented and what impact the project ultimately had on the organization. Furthermore, other studies relied on a similar methodology to assess the impact of capstone projects on client organizations (e.g., Schachter & Schwartz, 2009; Campbell & Lambright, 2011).

SATISFACTION WITH STUDENT PERFORMANCE & PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

Clients expressed a high level of satisfaction with both the practicum team and program administration. When asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the practicum team, 85% of respondents rated their experience as a 4 or 5 on our 5-point Likert scale; the remaining clients rated it a 3 (“somewhat satisfied”). As shown in Table 2, the mean rating was 4.4. Students were described by some clients as “very knowledgeable,” “enthusiastic, creative, and responsive,” “focused, hardworking,” “talented, insightful and productive,” and “very professional, smart, compassionate.” Among the six clients who indicated just moderate satisfaction, the most common reason they provided was that the students should have been more solicitous and responsive to client feedback. A couple of these clients also noted that the students provided insufficient support for their recommendations.

Table 2.
Satisfaction with Team Performance and Deliverables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Satisfactory with Team Performance</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>Mean Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with overall experience with team</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team’s professionalism</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team’s responsiveness to feedback</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation of technical work*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team’s understanding of essential issues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of team’s final report</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of team’s in-person presentation**</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Clients were even more satisfied with specific aspects of the team’s performance: the team’s professionalism, responsiveness to feedback, understanding of the essential issues, and ability to explain the technical work behind the project. The mean ratings on these variables ranged from 4.5 to 4.7. Regarding professionalism, one client wrote, “The team presented to both the [school
district[ and the representatives of the City…. It was done in an extremely professional manner
and was well-received by the stakeholders.” Most clients were highly satisfied with the students’
responsiveness to their feedback and explanation of technical work. Among the clients who
noted limitations in the students’ understanding of the relevant essential issues, some noted that
their gaps in knowledge were reasonable given the difficulty of the topics. For example, one
client wrote, “The report reflected a pretty deep understanding. The topic is inordinately
complex, so it doesn’t mean that the issues were nailed across the board.”

Clients also evaluated the two main team deliverables: the final report and oral presentation.
They gave high ratings for the quality of both deliverables; the means were 4.4 for the report and
4.7 for the presentation. Two respondents commented on the varied levels of public speaking
skills among team members, but all other comments on the presentations praised their quality.
One client stated, “The team members all did a fantastic job. They were presenting to a very
large group of people, and did well with their respective portions of the presentation as well as
with Q&A.” Another client commented that the students’ report met her institution’s difficult
“quality standard [for] analytics.”

Our small sample size prohibits us from making any definitive conclusions about differences in
client satisfaction by type of project. However, client feedback suggests that there were no
noteworthy differences in satisfaction between: undergraduate and graduate projects, projects for
local and non-local clients, projects for government and nonprofit organizations, and projects
that did and did not provide recommendations for the client’s organization.

Clients were highly satisfied with how the practicum was administered, providing a mean
ranking of 4.7. Those who wrote comments responded positively on the relationship between
the client and instructors. One client wrote that the instructor was “an exceptional liaison and
point of contact.” Respondents also complimented the instructors on how they worked with the
student teams. As one client remarked, the instructor “is highly communicative and supportive,
yet clearly places responsibility on the team.” Another client appreciated that the program was
not “‘heavy’ administratively.”

An additional gauge of client satisfaction with their practicum experience is whether clients
would be interested in participating again in the program. Only four clients (10%) were not
interested in being a client again. Three of these clients declined due to changes in their
positions that affected their capacity to serve as a client. The fourth client noted that he would
likely only participate again if he had a project that was crucial to his organization.

USEFULNESS OF PROJECTS
Most clients reported that the practicum projects were quite helpful to their organization.
Eighty-one percent of respondents provided a rating of 4 and above; the mean rating was 4.2.
Some clients noted that the projects were useful because they were innovative, providing “fresh
ideas,” “a different perspective and approach,” and “a counterpoint to challenge our
assumptions.” These new ideas often led clients to think and act differently on an issue. For
other clients, the students’ work was essential, because it provided independent confirmation of
the organization’s prior observations on an issue. These clients stressed the value of having the
students write up their analyses, noting that they used the reports to provide justification to
themselves and others for making policy changes. Recognizing that they would not have had time to do this work themselves, many clients remarked that the students’ work was also useful simply because it needed to be done. In the subsequent section on project impact, we further discuss the effects of the projects on the client organizations.

Clients were asked to indicate which aspects of the students’ work were most helpful. The question stated:

Many practicum projects include the following components and subcomponents: a) background research: describe the policy context, synthesize previous research, b) information gathering: interview or survey stakeholders/experts, collect quantitative/qualitative data, identify best practices, and c) analysis: establish evaluative criteria and decision-making framework, construct policy options, use analytical methods to forecast policy outcomes, make recommendations. Which components and subcomponents of your project were most helpful to your organization and why?

From the open-ended responses to this question, we coded which component/s clients found most helpful. The respondents were split somewhat evenly among identifying just one component (33%), two components (31%), and all three components (36%). Among clients who identified all three components as most helpful, one wrote, “The components are synergistic…The background research; quantitative, qualitative, and interview data; analysis and policy options, and resulting recommendations were all helpful to the overall impact of the project.” Two clients described in more detail how all three components were useful to their project:

Clearly all aspects were helpful. [T]he team gathered together a large amount of data on these organizations on a scale and in a way we had not been able to do before. The cumulative analysis was critical for us to frame the strategic trends in how these groups operate, as well as the subcontext in which they operate. The summaries of these findings were turned into intelligence production that was disseminated to senior Defense officials, as well as other inter-agency seniors. The [students’ work] has lived on, as it has been combined with classified sources, forming a baseline for various data profiles the intelligence community uses and updates to this day.

The whole report has been highly relevant for [our] efforts to anticipate and respond to widespread congressional interest in understanding China’s global economic engagement more broadly. The background data on natural resource trade across several sectors and countries provided new insights for us. The data and related analysis on free trade agreements [are] especially relevant to current U.S. policy considerations. Finally, the characterizations of the strategy, with inferences that were reasonably caveated, helps in focusing on the so what.

The percent of respondents who identified a component as the most helpful or one of the most helpful was 62% for information gathering, 67% for background research, and 74% for analysis. Among the respondents who identified just one component as most helpful, 57% indicated analysis, 29% background research, and 14% specified information gathering. Although more
clients identified the analysis component as the most useful, most respondents found the background research and information gathering components to be quite helpful as well.

**IMPACT OF PROJECTS**

Clients identified the effects of the students’ recommendations and the projects’ overall impact on their organizations and other organizations. They report that the projects were impactful. As later discussed, the project’s influence ranged from simply informing the debate on an issue to leading to specific changes in policies or programs.

**Adoption of Recommendations**

We first gauge project impact by examining the effects of the students’ recommendations on the client organization. Seventy-one percent of clients reported that the practicum team provided their organization with specific recommendations. Other teams provided recommendations but not for the client organization. For example, some nonprofits asked the students to evaluate state policies and make policy recommendations for which the organizations could advocate.

Most clients who received recommendations for their organizations reported high levels of satisfaction with them. As shown in Table 3, the mean rating was 4.2 for both how well the recommendations were supported and how well they were received by other members of the organization. Some reasons clients gave for moderate ratings were that the recommendations were politically or technically infeasible or simply unjustified given the evidence.

Table 3.

*Satisfaction and Usefulness of Recommendations Made by Practicum Teams*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>Mean Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of Respondents (row percentages)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for recommendations</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reception of recommendations</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of recommendations</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpfulness of implemented recommendations*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N=29. *N=17.

Over 80% of the clients who received recommendations implemented them to some extent. As shown in Table 3, 10% of the clients “implemented them fully.” Examples of how the recommendations were implemented include the following:

As recommended, we re-opened a seventh school and moved [a program to] the re-opened school.

The Governor’s office did implement them and also proposed legislation to do the
same, but the legislature and subsequent administration reduced the force of the recommendations.

Among those who implemented the recommendations, they reported that they have been helpful. The mean rating for the helpfulness of implemented recommendations was 4.2. Every respondent who indicated that her or his organization fully implemented the recommendations rated the recommendations’ helpfulness as a 5.

As shown in Table 4, clients provided many reasons for why they had not implemented some or all of the students’ recommendations. Most clients provided more than one reason. Over half of the clients specified that limitations in resources were an obstacle to implementation. The remaining reasons were unforeseen changes (e.g., political and economic climate) for 26% of respondents, restrictions by other members of the organization (21%), and challenges posed by the structure of the organization (16%). Twenty-one percent of respondents answered “other” (e.g., technically infeasible). One-fifth of respondents indicated that they expected to follow the recommendations in the future when the time was right (e.g., when they receive more funding). None of them stated that the recommendations were not implemented because they were “unhelpful.”

Table 4.
Reasons For Not Following Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will follow the recommendations in the future</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited by funding and additional resources</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted by other members of the organization</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges posed by the structure of the organization</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unforeseen changes (e.g., political/economic climate)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations were unhelpful</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: N=19. Column percentages do not add up to 100, because the categories are not mutually exclusive.*

**Overall Impact**

We asked clients to identify the type of impact/s the students’ work had on their organizations. All respondents except one indicated that the project affected their organization in one or more ways. The client who reported no impact said the students did not contribute anything new to their topic, because “the issues were very difficult and too new” and required information from foreign sources that the students were unable to obtain.

The most frequent responses for type of impact were increased understanding of the policy issue
and policy options. As shown in Table 5, most clients indicated that the project increased their understanding of the policy issue (71%) and policy options (59%). Clients provided specifics regarding how understanding was increased, as illustrated by these quotes:

This project added considerably to the research base in teacher evaluation and dismissal policies at a state level.

The community was still learning much about high speed rail so the students provided much in the way of baseline information and provided a dispassionate perspective that was very appreciated by the community.

Table 5.
Project’s Impact on Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Impact</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased understanding of the policy issue</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased understanding of the policy options</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforced existing plans/policies</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modified existing plans/policies</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considered new plans/policies</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implemented new plans/policies</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No impact</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=41. Column percentages do not add up to 100, because the categories are not mutually exclusive.

Many clients also reported that the students’ work affected their existing plans and policies by reinforcing them (37%) or leading them to modify them (12%). According to one client, the project “generated some good discussion and provided clear back up to the observations that staff have made for many years.” Another client noted that the project helped her organization understand why it should not undertake an initiative it was considering. The projects also led clients to consider new plans and policies (34%) and to implement them (20%). In describing how his students’ work led to new efforts, a client wrote:

The project clearly shifted the focus of our district to initiatives that could reduce our carbon footprint and would develop student awareness of their personal responsibilities for sustainable practices. We have expanded our garden programs, successfully applied for grants to retrofit our buses, reduced energy consumption through more intentional practices, and developed plans to move to "greener" facilities.
Over half of the clients indicated that they used internal or other resources to follow up on or complement the students’ work. In addition, 61% of clients reported that they shared the findings from the projects with other organizations. Clients distributed the students’ work largely through sending the final reports to government agencies and nonprofits in their networks, posting them on their website, featuring them in their publications (e.g., reports, newsletters, blogs), and informing the press. One client commented that the students’ proposed methodology was incorporated in the organization’s 2012 rankings of countries’ fiscal conditions, which “were released, publicized, and included in various speeches, articles and Op-Eds.”

Among the clients who shared the students’ work, 41% expected that the projects did have an impact on other organizations, 7% thought they did not, and 52% were unsure. The following comments show how some non-client organizations were affected by the projects.

We discussed some of the report’s findings with wine industry representatives to elevate the discussion about the impact of climate change on the industry.

Just the press around the [students’] numbers was very helpful in drawing attention to the true size of pension liabilities. Journalists had their eyes opened.

The research wasn't for us directly, but for a group of local government agencies that we convene. The research and analysis was very useful to those agencies, and we got a lot of great feedback from those who attended the final presentation.

LESSONS LEARNED
From the survey results and past studies, we identify four course design elements that substantially contribute to the clients’ high levels of satisfaction with this program. Each element helps the program overcome obstacles that have been reported by clients in past service-learning courses. As subsequently described, these elements are consulting-based course design, appropriate projects, close faculty involvement, and continuous feedback from client organizations. We discuss a few additional lessons we learned from the results as well: communicate findings effectively, consider feasibility, and better facilitate non-local projects. We hope these findings help other institutions design or modify their practicum programs to most effectively meet client and student needs.

Keep Consulting-Based Course Design: Past studies have discussed how the nature of consulting-based service-learning courses helps address some problems client organizations have identified with other service-learning courses (Bushouse, 2005; Shea & Weiss, 2013). For Stanford’s program, the problems of academic calendar constraints and inability to meet clients’ needs were largely overcome by having the instructor work with the client to find a project that would serve the organization’s needs, use the students’ skills, and be accomplished by the end of the course. By having projects that enabled students to apply the analytical tools they learned in the curriculum, the problems of inadequate preparation and low quality work were much less of an issue. The time and resources required by clients were also limited due to students serving as off-site consultants and clients getting to propose projects that would only require the amount of time and other resources that they could provide.
Set Up Appropriate Projects: The literature and client comments make clear how important it is to set up projects that not only enable students to apply their skills, but also address clients’ needs and are achievable by students during the course (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Gazley et al., 2013; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Ward, 1999). In our survey, a client stated that “it works well when there is from the beginning a good fit between the real needs of the organization and the topic chosen.” The two projects that were less client-driven resulted in less client satisfaction. As one client explained:

I was reminded that this sort of project tends to only work when demand-driven—that is, when a client really needs the service provided by the students. If you try to find a project that more or less works (as I did), it’s not quite as valuable. … I did not structure the project in a way to make it actionable.

A client who supervised two projects suggested that the project match student interests as well. She was more satisfied with the work done on the practicum project that had more student interest, concluding that “it’s really the quality of the students and their interest in the topic that makes a project worthwhile.”

The client and instructor also need to ensure that the projects are feasible. In a few projects, the students were unable to access essential data for their projects. For example, a project for the intelligence community was severely impeded, because the team could not obtain classified materials necessary for their analysis. There were two additional projects that clients later decided were too difficult for the students. One client felt that her project had been too broad for the students. Another client learned that one should not “expect the students to comprehend highly political issues, especially when they involve complex international relations.”

To help ensure that projects are appropriate, the practicum program provides information on its website designed to help organizations propose projects that are good fits for them and the students. This information includes the project’s requirements, students’ qualifications, and past reports. In the online proposal form, the potential client must note why the project is important to her or his organization. Additionally, the program administrators and/or instructors often work with organizations to help them select appropriate projects. Recently, the practicum program has also postponed some projects, because it was unclear that the necessary data would be available in time for the course.

Involve Instructor at All Stages: Partner organizations in some service-learning courses complain that the faculty do not engage with the organizations enough to ensure that the courses meet the organizations’ needs (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Gazley et al., 2013; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Ward, 1999). However, in Stanford’s program, the instructor is actively involved with both the organizations and the students. In their evaluations of how the instructor administered the practicum course, the clients provided highly positive ratings and comments.

As discussed earlier, instructors contact potential clients before the course begins to explain the course and offer to work with them to determine an appropriate project. The instructor also makes clear to clients that he or she is available for any questions or concerns they have during
the course. After the course begins, some instructors check in with the client informally and attend client meetings.

A few clients remarked on how helpful the instructor was when setting up the projects. As one client wrote, “[The instructor] was excellent to work with and incredibly supportive in helping us identify a project (We had several in mind!).” Another client mentioned that the instructor carefully selected students appropriate for the team. One project was jeopardized midway through the course due to unexpected internal issues of the client’s organization, but the client reported that the instructor “did everything he could” to enable the project to work out in the end. Other clients wrote positively about the instructor’s role in general. According to one client:

[The instructor is] an excellent facilitator who expertly matches and coordinates the needs of our organization with the development of her students. [She is] highly organized, responsive, and supportive, and … made me feel that our [organization] and her students were in excellent hands.

Although the instructor interacts less with clients once the project begins, he or she is involved throughout the project on the student side. The instructor meets regularly with the students to discuss their progress and advise on next steps. Additionally, he or she provides feedback on drafts of each client deliverable, holds practice sessions for the presentations, and sometimes attends the students’ client meetings. The instructor is also on call for any issues the students have during the quarter. The instructor’s hands-on role with students undoubtedly helps minimize problems with student performance and work quality that have been reported with other service-learning courses (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Vernon & Ward, 1999; Worrall, 2007).

Reviewing drafts of client deliverables can be very time consuming for instructors. If necessary, instructors will comment heavily on drafts of the reports, including pointing out unsupported claims, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, and unclear writing. Instructors sometimes require and provide feedback on a second draft as well. To improve draft quality and reduce the need for feedback, instructors have had students read past reports, required outlines of drafts, incorporated peer review, distributed writing guidelines and held writing workshops, and asked students to work with the campus writing center. Nonetheless, some instructors put in more than twice as much time as usual during the weeks when they review client deliverables. The program believes the review process increases client satisfaction and student learning (i.e., it helps teach students how to produce high-quality policy work). Even with extensive feedback, however, some teams’ outputs disappoint their clients and/or do not meet the course standards.

Recognizing the crucial and multiple roles the instructor should play throughout the project, the program seeks instructors who can not only advise the students on their projects, but also effectively communicate with the clients. Additionally, the program mentors new practicum instructors to enable them to best execute their roles.

**Incorporate Client Feedback Throughout Project**: Many studies have stressed the need to include more feedback from partner organizations during service-learning experiences (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Gazley et al., 2013; Gelmon et al., 1998; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Vernon & Ward, 1999). In our survey, some clients made similar observations.
One client found the students to be very responsive to her organization’s feedback and wrote, “Close collaboration at key moments of the process is necessary to ensure students are on the right path and understand the needs of the organization.” Another client suggested that students communicate their status weekly. A few clients explained that the project would likely have been better if the client had been more involved, as illustrated by the following quotes.

The analysis was quite good, but probably would have benefited from more back-and-forth [with us]…. More conversations might have yielded creative solutions. Our buy-in to the project waned because of the lack of interaction.

While I appreciate that the students wanted to work independently, their final product would have been more useful if they had better utilized our staff and stakeholders for guidance and feedback. Our assistance and information was not offered to change or direct their research but to support it.

One client recommended seeking more client feedback in the project design stage to ensure that the students and clients had the same expectations for the project. Another client wrote that the project might “have benefited from a bit more structure, for example, an early definition and review of their topic, resources, and research plan since [it was] a very broad topic to address for a short term group project.” Although students are required to prepare a research plan for the instructor, these comments suggest that they should submit it to the client as well.

While acknowledging that client feedback is important throughout the project, the program hesitates to require client interaction beyond having to participate in the three required clients meetings. Most clients were satisfied with the amount of their feedback that was sought and incorporated during the projects, and the program does not want serving as a client to become too burdensome for some organizations to participate. In addition, some teams do not have time to incorporate all their client’s feedback, especially toward the end of the projects.

For some projects, clients have asked the students to communicate with them more often than required, and the students have obliged. Many instructors also have students solicit client feedback on their initial plan of analysis. To address some clients’ desire for more interaction, students are expected to ask at the first client meeting whether the client would like to communicate more frequently than just during the three required client meetings. Thus, the program does not require additional communication, but it provides opportunities for more interaction if desired.

While the program highly values client input, it also recognizes that there are limits to how far students should go in meeting client demands and making their projects impactful. For example, when the students disagree with components of their client’s feedback, the instructors support the students in exercising their independent judgment in choosing whether to follow it. Many clients ask the students to continue working on the project after the course ends, including presenting their results to other audiences, revising their report for greater impact, and seeking press coverage of their findings. Recognizing the learning opportunities for students and the benefits to clients of follow-up work, the program offers students academic course units for additional work on their projects. At the same time, the program makes it clear to the students and clients
that students are under no obligation to continue working on the project after the course ends.

To help prevent potential disappointment and frustration by clients when their projects end, the practicum instructors explain the timeline and student requirements when setting up the projects. In most cases, instructors also work with the clients to help them find a project that should be sufficiently impactful by the course’s end. Although these steps help manage client expectations, there are still some clients who feel that their projects ended too abruptly. For certain types of projects, the practicum program is considering having sequential practicum teams work on one project so there is more time to disseminate and/or implement the findings. Occasionally, clients also expect the instructors to continue to collaborate on the project after its end, so clearly managing those expectations is important as well.

**Communicate Findings Effectively:** The students’ final reports for clients typically include brief background information on the topic, a description of the students’ data and methodology, the results, and recommendations. Graduate students are also required to write a short policy brief about their project. As mentioned earlier, clients reported that they were pleased with the reports and accompanying presentations. Yet a couple clients noted that their projects could have had larger impacts if the students worked with them more when finishing up their analysis and reports. As one client stated, “If we had more time to refine things, it could have been an influential paper.” The other client wrote:

> The [team was] very responsive during the data collection phase but we needed a much closer … collaboration [at the end]. We would have appreciated the opportunity to review and comment more extensively on drafts of the papers and ensure that the final draft was properly copy-edited and the release well-timed.

The program agrees that more client participation at the end of a project would likely increase its impact. In the two-quarter graduate practicum course, there is enough time for clients to review drafts and for students to incorporate their feedback. Yet in the 10-week undergraduate course, it is difficult to find this additional time. Nonetheless, for particularly complex undergraduate projects that might have influence beyond the client’s organization, some instructors incorporate client review of the drafts. Some students have also chosen to work with their clients on refining their reports after the course. Although they may receive academic course units for this additional collaboration, most students undertake it without the units.

Another client suggested increasing project impact by seeking “powerful ways to communicate results.” Currently, all reports are given to the client and posted on the Public Policy Program’s website. The Public Policy Program has helped get press coverage for certain projects and encouraged teams to write op-eds. Many clients choose to disseminate the students’ work by sending out copies of their reports, posting them on their websites, and/or inviting various stakeholders to the students’ final presentations. Clients have also sought press coverage of the projects and featured them in their organizations’ communications, such as newsletters, blogs, reports, and presentations. After the students’ presentations, some clients have asked them to present their findings to others, including local, state, and national policymakers.

Students certainly learn from communicating their results in different ways, and such efforts
likely increase project impact. Nonetheless, they are only required to write their final report, give a presentation of their findings, and for graduate students, write a policy brief. Despite being able to get additional academic course units, most students choose to stop working on their projects after the course ends due to lack of time and/or interest.

Consider Feasibility: Recommendations need to be feasible for client organizations to adopt them. As Schachter and Schwartz concluded in their evaluation of a different program, recommendations must consider “the unique realities of the participating agencies” (2009, p. 454). In our survey, one client noted, “The practicum professor and I needed to bring a little political reality to the recommendations.” Another client mentioned that his organization had limited use for the team’s research, because the team did not consider the feasibility of their recommendations. He wrote:

> While supported on a technical level, the report’s recommendations were not sufficiently analyzed for feasibility. All climate change solutions [must consider] cost, implementation timeline, sectors responsible to act, and political will. This aspect of the report needed to be developed more to translate into action points.

Although the students receive more training in economics and statistics, they do receive training in politics, policymaking, and organizational behavior. The practicum instructors are expected to remind students of this training and ensure that they consider feasibility issues. At the least, the students should take into account the client’s view of the organization’s relevant constraints for the project.

While it is important to consider feasibility, all recommendations should not be discarded if they appear infeasible at that time. Budgetary and political constraints might change over time due to various factors, including economic conditions and the report’s findings. In addition, one of the students’ strengths as outsiders is that they can see beyond current constraints to devise long-term and innovative solutions that organizations may not have considered. The report may also be used by other organizations that do not have the same constraints as the client has.

Better Facilitate Non-Local Projects: While all the undergraduate projects have been for local clients, ten of the graduate projects were for clients based in Sacramento or outside California. Although another study found that clients were less satisfied with non-local practicum projects (Campbell & Lambright, 2011), both the local and non-local clients in our study reported high levels of satisfaction with their experiences. However, a couple of the non-local organizations recommended ways to improve their experiences. One client suggested “regular [contact] using Skype or similar technologies to ensure a level of familiarity, comfort, and more regular dialogue amongst participants.” For projects involving international work, a client recommended that the program provide travel grants. She added, “The interviews on this project were done remotely via Skype, which isn’t as effective as in-person interviews that facilitate deeper professional connections.”

All students with non-local clients are encouraged to videoconference with their clients, and some teams have successfully used Skype and similar applications for this purpose. The Public Policy Program has also provided travel grants for students to present their findings to D.C.
ADAPTABILITY OF MODEL TO OTHER INSTITUTIONS

Although our study focused on only one program, other practicum programs and courses have found similar results. As previously discussed, a number of practica have been successful at satisfying partner organizations and making valuable contributions to them (Bernstein et al., 2003; Bushouse, 2005; Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Killian, 2004; Schachter & Schwartz, 2009; Whitaker & Berner, 2004). These offerings vary across many dimensions, including course topic (e.g., nonprofit management, municipal government), student characteristics (e.g., MPA students or undergraduates majoring in political science), size, location, and course design components (e.g., time frame, elective or required courses, team or individual-based projects).

Similar to the Stanford experience, the success of these programs in benefitting clients appears to be largely driven by a few key course design elements, which enable them to avoid client problems with other service-learning experiences. By having a consulting-based course structure, setting up appropriate projects, and involving clients throughout the projects, clients’ needs were generally communicated and addressed in the projects. The fourth course design element, close faculty involvement, was more limited in one of the programs. Although the faculty met regularly with the students, he or she often did not have contact with the client organizations. Although this program still satisfied its clients overall, researchers concluded that increased faculty involvement with clients would likely have increased the projects’ benefits for some clients (Campbell & Lambright, 2011).

Within Stanford’s program and other practicum programs, clients expressed more satisfaction with some projects than others. Part of this variation was due to differences in process variables. For example, most of the Stanford clients were pleased with how their feedback was incorporated in the projects, but some clients were not. Client satisfaction also differed by type of project. Clients were more satisfied when students provided them with organizational assessments and new tools and resources (Schachter & Schwartz, 2009). At the same time, client responses did not vary between projects that provided recommendations and those that did not in Stanford’s program and another program (Schachter & Schwartz, 2009). Local clients were more satisfied than non-local clients in one program (Campbell & Lambright, 2011), but they had similar levels of satisfaction in Stanford’s program.

Based on the overall success of these practicum programs and the literature on client problems with service learning, we expect that all practicum programs would greatly benefit from having a process that ensures that projects are tailored to the clients’ needs and students’ skills. Seeking client feedback throughout the projects and having close faculty involvement with students and clients also appear crucial for high client satisfaction. Incorporating these program design elements can be done in many ways. For example, to solicit appropriate practicum projects, a number of MPA programs use a widely publicized online RFP process while instructors of some elective practicum courses directly reach out to organizations that would be good fits for their courses. Programs have employed various mechanisms to obtain client feedback, such as having student meetings and informal faculty check-ins with clients and getting clients to comment on drafts and fill out evaluations of the students’ work. To help supervise the projects, faculty have relied on weekly or occasional meetings with individual teams, in-class discussions, assignments,
journals, on-line forums, client feedback, and peer evaluations.

Similar to the key program design elements, other course characteristics can vary substantially across effective programs. For example, courses can vary by topic (e.g., program evaluation, research methods in political science, MPP & MPA capstone courses), student characteristics (e.g., undergraduate or graduate, traditional or non-traditional), length (e.g., 4 weeks or two semesters), elective status (required or not), staffing (e.g., one or more instructors, use of teaching/course assistants), and institution (e.g., urban or rural, community college or university). There is also flexibility in how much of the course is devoted to the project. In some courses, the project plays a much smaller role than it does in Stanford’s courses. The frequency and type of readings, assignments, and evaluations pertaining to the project can also differ significantly across courses.

Some faculty and administrators are hesitant to adopt practicum courses for various reasons. Compared to traditional lecture or seminar courses, practicum courses can require more preparation before the course begins, including setting up projects with client organizations (Imperial et al., 2007; Tai-Seale, 2001). Some instructors find that it is more time consuming to teach practicum courses as well (e.g., Killian, 2004). Effective practicum courses also appear to require a fairly low student to instructor ratio.

Yet considering the substantial variety of types of effective practicum courses, it is possible for many instructors to find ways to offer an effective practicum course that minimize their concerns. For example, an instructor who is concerned about additional time requirements could offer a small elective course in which the practicum projects were quite limited in scope, just for one client, and comprised only a minor part of the class. Collaborative teaching is another possible time-saving method (Bernstein et al., 2003). Some instructors have also received funding to cover the extra time required for creating a new practicum course (e.g., Imperial et al., 2007; Shea & Weiss, 2013).

Although we have focused on practicum programs in this article, we expect that many of our conclusions apply to other forms of service learning as well. All types of service-learning courses would likely benefit from setting up appropriate course projects, incorporating feedback from participating organizations, and having close faculty involvement. Considering that the range of service-learning courses is much broader than of practicum courses, many instructors could likely find feasible and effective ways to incorporate service learning into their courses.

Practicum courses have been shown to benefit students and client organizations. However, in this article, we have demonstrated that certain conditions make practicum courses more beneficial to client organizations than others. Therefore, whether developing new service-learning opportunities or refining existing ones, we strongly encourage instructors and administrators to give careful consideration to how every course component is structured, including the roles for clients, faculty, and students. Differences in course design can make large differences to client satisfaction, project impact, and student learning.
REFERENCES


