ENGAGING INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDENTS IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF GOVERNANCE MODELS FOR A NON-PROFIT AGING AGENCY: AN EVALUATION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary student members from a non-profit interdisciplinary gerontology association,
guided by an academic board member, conducted a scan of the literature and other non-profit
organizations bylaws for the purpose of supporting the board in reviewing their governance
structure. The environmental scan elucidated five components of organizations that critically
affect the non-profit organizational governance of non-for profit agencies - the governance
model, how policy is developed, the role of executives, and how both finances and risks are
managed. During the project students increased their capacity and knowledge of: how to work in
a team environment within a research context, the research process, and the interdisciplinary
gerontological association for which the research was performed. Students recommend that this
method of using student volunteers to assist with research as a way for non-profit associations to
engage students and complete research projects. This project was completed April 30, 2016

Key words: interdisciplinary learning, environmental scan, non-profit agency

Introduction

The complex health needs and social circumstances of the aging population frequently
necessitate the involvement of multiple disciplines (Arbaje et al., 2010; Hartgerink et al., 2014;
Johannsson, Eklund, & Gosman-Hedstrom, 2010). However, collaboration among these
disciplines can be inhibited by conflict and conceptual confusion about language and roles
(Barrow, et al., 2014; Perrault & Careau, 2012; Martin & Finn, 2011; Smith-Carrier & Neysmith,
2014). To address these challenges, interdisciplinary education has been promoted as a means to

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improve collaborative practice (Baker, et al, 2008; Hammick et al., 2007). Despite the value of interdisciplinary education, it is not without challenges, such as scheduling, lack of faculty buy-in and rigid curricula (Delunas & Rouse, 2014). Another informal way for students to learn about gerontological concerns - as well as how to collaborate with other disciplines - is through involvement in interdisciplinary non-profit gerontological associations. A non-profit interdisciplinary association invited their student membership to assist with its governance review process by conducting a scan of the literature and other non-profit agencies. This paper reports on the process students engaged in to conduct the environmental scan project, a summary of the findings from their research, and student reflections on the learning that occurred throughout their engagement in the project.

The Process

Under the direction of an academic board member, graduate and undergraduate interdisciplinary students self-selected into one of two groups: reviewing the literature, (one graduate and two undergraduate students) or reviewing bylaws of other non-profit agencies (two graduate and one undergraduate). Each of these groups was led by a graduate student. The academic scheduled monthly meetings and provided guidance as needed during the process.

Methods

Four databases - Business Source Complete, ABI Inform Complete, ProQuest Business Collection Complete, and Medline - were searched for literature published between 2000- 2015 using the following keywords: governance structure, roles and responsibilities, bylaws, policies, nonprofit agencies, and gerontology and geriatrics. The search yielded approximately 4000 articles and of these 11 articles fit within the inclusion criteria were selected. Please see Figure one for a pictorial review of the search process. Written requests for a copy of organization bylaws was sent to 13 associations and seven non-profit associations responded and their bylaws were reviewed.

Students' Findings

The role of a board has pivotal influence on nonprofits' organizational governance (e.g. Saj, 2013; Tysiac, 2013). Students identified organizational governance model, policy development, executive role, financial management, and risk management as critical components of governance A well-functioning board effectively coordinates with management and monitors financial governance (Saj, 2013), demonstrates a strong leadership role in the organization (Daigneault, 2005), clarifies the organization's values (Tysiac, 2013), and mission statements (Peregrine, 2007). Good governance includes leadership, a positive organizational culture, critical thinking, control, accessibility to financial expertise (Daigneault, 2005) and strong committees (Abbott, 2009; Saj, 2013). Moreover, boards should include at least five members, with at least two thirds of each comprised of individuals with diverse backgrounds. This ensures that the board is composed of a cross-representation of the members in the organization

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(Peregrine, 2007; Tysiac, 2013). Different governance models are suggested for different types of purposes (Daigneault, 2005; Tysiac, 2013).

Unfortunately the examples cited within the reviewed literature excluded volunteers from the board yet identified them as significant to non-profit governance (Jegers, 2009), limiting the usefulness of their suggestions to an organization that is run primarily by volunteers. Moreover, only one of the bylaws had direct similarity to the interdisciplinary association because it also had a board consisting of volunteers and was focused on gerontology. Despite these limitations, there were many similarities in board functions among the associations reviewed and useful suggestions for not for profit boards within the literature.

At the end of this process students presented their findings via both a report to the board and a poster presentation at a networking dinner for the interdisciplinary gerontology association.

Student Reflections

Students were asked about what they learned by participating in this process – in terms of collaborating with students from other disciplines, the research process, and disseminating their findings. What follows is a description of the students' reflections on the process.

Methods

After students had completed their report to the board, the academic emailed a number of questions about the process for the students to reflect upon. The questions included: what did you learn about collaborating with students from other disciplines; what did you learn through conducting the literature review and bylaw review portion of the project; what did you learn about writing a report and a designing a poster; how useful or inhibiting was the academic's guidance? Students participated in a group discussion about these questions and/or emailed their thoughts. Students also added other feedback on the process.

Five of the six students participated in providing feedback. They included: two PhD students (Architectural Design/Human Ecology and Occupational Therapy); one student who recently completed a Master's degree in Science who works in Public Health; one Human Ecology undergraduate; and one combined Human Ecology and Education undergraduate student. Two students provided feedback via email and four participated in the group discussion. The group discussion was audiotaped after verbal permission from the participants. Data was transcribed verbatim. The academic analyzed these data using content analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).

Findings

Data analysis yielded three themes:
(1) advancing their ability to work as in teams,
(2) learning about the research process, and

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(3) enhancing their ability to collaborate and engage with the Board. These themes are discussed next.

Working as a Team

Students learned how to cooperate and communicate with individuals from a variety of disciplines and skill levels. As one student explains: "I learnt something about the communication cooperation and how to build trust and respect for everyone here because we come from different disciplines" (Student 2). The two graduate students who took the lead on each portion of the project (one led the literature review and the other led the bylaw review), learned how to lead a team of student researchers, which included supporting "each person [to] take responsibility" for their portion of the work. The undergraduate students identified that they were "treated as equals…[and] the leadership style [the graduate students had] was very inviting and foster[ed]…growth" (Student 3). The undergraduate students also expressed their appreciation of the academic's understanding that their course work took priority by scheduling meetings around the students' commitments. Students identified that working with students from other disciplines and levels of education provided them with insight into how different perspectives can improve the final project: "I think collaboration contributes to making the project more robust and complete" (Student 1). Another student appreciated the importance of an interdisciplinary approach "because you have a holistic approach" (Student 4). All in all, students increased their abilities to work as part of an interdisciplinary team and gained a greater appreciation of interdisciplinary approaches.

Learning about Research

Both the undergraduate students and the graduate students reported that they learned (and built upon) important skills in conducting research as a result of engaging in this project. These skills included time management, organization, conducting thorough data extraction, and reporting findings. Despite a "steep learning curve," (Student 4) the graduate student leads fostered "organization and clarity" (Student 4) in managing "a constructive transmission of knowledge" (Student 4).

The academic provided structure and guidance with the research process by providing tables to guide data extraction from the literature and the bylaws. Students found using this structure aided them in identifying important information in the articles and bylaws. One student used a similar table to organize her literature for a paper she was writing in one of her classes: "the chart certainly helped me [to get] 24/25" (Student 3) on the paper, which she found "empowering…it works" (Student 3).

Students also gained experience through writing a research report and by developing a poster presentation. Although one of the graduate students took the lead on each of these components of the project, she shared her draft of both the writing and poster with the other students so that they could incorporate their feedback. The students' learning in this regard is highlighted by the following: "This project was a good exercise/training to further improve my

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report writing and poster design skills" (Student 1). Another student identified that "it was good to see the research process" (Student 3). This evidence suggests that the students' opportunity to engage in this project fostered learning and growth. Specifically, students were empowered by the practice of reading literature for the purposes of identifying salient points, organizing the main points of the literature concisely, and expanding their ability to write reports, papers, and posters. One student identified that being a part of the research process also fostered a "desire to pursue graduate studies" (Student 4) highlighting the significance of engaging students in this project.

Engaging with the Board

Students reported that engaging in this project contributed to their learning about non-profit agencies and fostered a deeper sense of commitment to the gerontology association. One student highlighted that reviewing the bylaws provided "a good understanding of the general formatting, components put into bylaws…it was good because I am sure I need to know about bylaws in the future" (Student 5). Most of the students identified a desire to "contribute more" to the association and that this type of project is "a good way [to involve] younger students" (Student 4) in the organization. The students agreed that the project facilitated their engagement with the interdisciplinary association and recommended other organizations consider this model as a way to increase student engagement. This is exemplified by the following: "This model could be used by more organizations because students need some research experience and some volunteer opportunities" (Student 2).

Discussion

The findings from evaluating this project revealed that in addition to the board receiving a report to guide their governance discussions, students gained experience working with individuals from other disciplines, engaging with the research process, and collaborating with non-profit associations. Moreover, the students experienced a deeper commitment to the interdisciplinary gerontological association and expressed interest in continuing to be involved in the organization.

The successful engagement of interdisciplinary students in this project could be due in part, to the small numbers involved (six) and students' appreciation for the importance of their project to the association. Scholars who have examined learning that occurs with diverse disciplines suggest that students learn best about collaborating with other disciplines when they are learning together in small groups and are engaged in meaningful activities (Baker et al., 2008; Hammick et al., 2007; Reeves et al., 2009). Other scholars who have examined volunteering suggest that it is multidimensional and not much is known about attitudes, personalities and contexts related to volunteering (Smith, 1994). Students in this project identified a strong motivation to be a volunteer and to learn more about the research process.

This evaluation is limited in part because the academic who supported the students in the project also gathered students' reflections. Although students were assured that all types of

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reflection were welcome and voluntary, it is possible that they did not feel comfortable voicing criticism. That being said, participants did have suggestions for improvement. These suggestions included setting time aside for a face-to-face meeting to discuss the report, rather than relying on email. In addition, students identified that they would have more time to work on such a project in the summer months (fewer time commitments related to writing exams and papers). More research or evaluations of similar types of projects are needed to determine if these students' experiences were unique, or whether this model of participation has practical utility for other associations.

Conclusions

An interdisciplinary student group within a gerontological association were tasked with conducting an environment scan to support the board in reviewing their model of governance. Students learned about working together, engaging in a research process and more about the gerontological association. In addition, the students were able to apply some of the research skills they learned in their course work and developed a sense of commitment and connection to the association.

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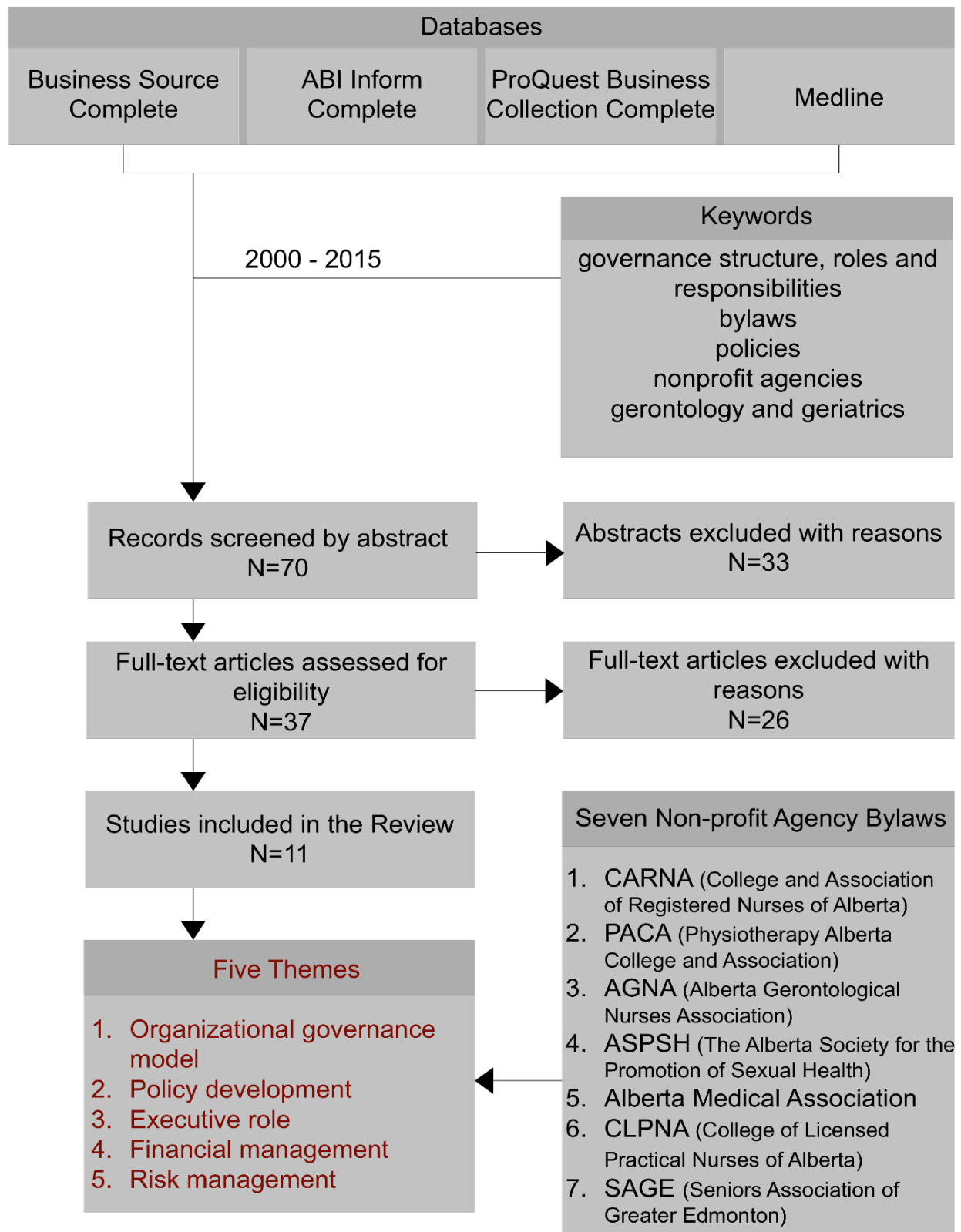 non-profit aging agency: An evaluation of interdisciplinary learning

Figure One: Literature Review Process