

Experiential Philanthropy: A Systematic Review of Peer-Reviewed Literature

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Abstract

This paper provides a systematic review of the experiential philanthropy studies published in peer-reviewed journals. There are eighteen articles published in journals in diverse disciplines from 2005 through 2020. The study does bibliometric analysis on the journals, year of publication, and co-authorship network. Four major research themes emerge in the literature: the concept of experiential philanthropy, its roots in service-learning, current practice, and the efficacy of experiential philanthropy. A variety of methodologies have been applied in previous experiential philanthropy studies, including case studies, quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, and experiments. The author also addresses the limitations of previous studies and points out the future direction of experiential philanthropy research.

Keywords: experiential philanthropy, service learning, nonprofit education

Introduction

Experiential philanthropy is an innovative service-learning pedagogy that allows students to address social problems, evaluate nonprofit organizations, and then make decisions or recommendations about grant distribution into nonprofits that are working to address these

problems. In the past two decades, this pedagogical approach has become a component of nonprofit management education and philanthropy education. With the younger generation becoming more socially-minded, and the development of university-community partnership, there is an emerging number of experiential philanthropy initiatives at higher education institutes across the world.

Following this trend in practice, research on experiential philanthropy has experienced a prosperous development. Experiential philanthropy has been studied empirically since the beginning of the 21st century, and there has been an increase in scholarly attention in recent years. However, existing studies in experiential philanthropy are generally descriptive. The contexts of those research studies are mostly program-based. Many of them evaluate the outcome of certain programs, however, the generalizability is problematic. As a result, the theory of experiential philanthropy has not been developed. Though experiential philanthropy programs exist in undergraduate and graduate programs in diverse disciplines, no cross-discipline study has been done. The topic of experiential philanthropy lacks a systematic review of the research to understand the full scope of the knowledge over time.

In this paper, the author systematically looks at the trends and characteristics of experiential philanthropy studies published in peer-reviewed journals. 18 articles over diverse disciplines published from 2005 to 2020 are reviewed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the experiential philanthropy articles published in peer-reviewed journals?
- What are the themes in peer-reviewed experiential philanthropy literature?
- What methodology has been applied to the experiential philanthropy research?

- What are the limitations of previous studies in experiential philanthropy?
- What are the directions for future studies in experiential philanthropy?

To answer these questions, this paper first presents a thorough list of the peer-viewed publications, synthesizes their themes, summarizes the applied methodologies, discusses the limitations in current studies, and points out the future directions. This study aims to add to the knowledge development in experiential philanthropy and contribute toward a theory of experiential philanthropy. The goal is also to suggest future research directions in the area and provide valuable insights for experiential philanthropy educators.

Article Search and Bibliometric Analysis

A thorough search of the literature on experiential philanthropy is done in three steps. First, a list of articles is searched with Google Scholar. Searched keywords include: experiential philanthropy, student philanthropy, student giving, philanthropy pedagogy, philanthropy education, experiential philanthropy, service learning, and nonprofit education. Results are sorted by relevance. By reading the abstract, articles on the topic of experiential philanthropy are selected to the list. Second, the list of related articles for each selected article is checked. The related articles include the references at the end of each paper, “related articles” and “cited by” recognized by Google Scholar. Third, only articles from peer-reviewed journals are selected, leaving out book chapters and conference papers. The final list of peer-reviewed literature on experiential philanthropy includes 18 peer-reviewed articles. A list of the final selected articles is shown in Table 1, ordered by year of publication.

Table 1. List of Selected Articles

Title	Author	Year	Journal
The student philanthropists: Fostering civic engagement through grantmaking	Irvin, R. A.	2005	Journal of Public Affairs Education
Live case studies in organizational change: Learning about change through student philanthropy and service learning	Sigler, T.	2006	International Journal of Case Method Research and Application
Can student philanthropy help to address the current nonprofit identity crisis? A case study of a multiyear, multidisciplinary project at Northern Kentucky University	Ahmed, S., & Olberding, J.	2007	Journal of Public Affairs Education
Student philanthropy in colleges and universities	Millisor, J., & Olberding, J. C.	2009	Academic Exchange Quarterly
Indirect giving to nonprofit organizations: An emerging model of student philanthropy	Olberding, J. C.	2009	Journal of Public Affairs Education
Does student philanthropy work? A study of long-term effects of the “Learning by Giving” approach	Olberding, J. C.	2012	Innovative Higher Education
Learning by giving: A quasi-experimental study of student philanthropy in criminal justice education	McDonald, D., & Olberding, J. C.	2012	Journal of Criminal Justice Education
Practicing philanthropy in American higher education: Cultivating engaged citizens and nonprofit sector professionals	Campbell, D. A.	2014	Journal of Public Affairs Education
Preparing social work students for leadership in human service organizations through student philanthropy.	McClendon, J., Kagotho, N., & Lane, S. R.	2016	Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance
Can philanthropy be taught?	McDougle, L., McDonald, D., Li, H., McIntyre Miller, W., & Xu, C	2017	Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly

Paying it forward: The role of student philanthropy course activities on civic outcomes	Benenson, J., & Moldow, E.	2017	Journal of Public Affairs Education
connecting through giving: understanding the effect of the Mayerson student philanthropy project	McDonald, D., Miller, W. M., & McDougale, L.	2017	The Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership
Student philanthropy: Connecting BSW students, schools of social work, and communities	Kagotho, N., McClendon, J., & Lane, S.	2017	Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work
Student philanthropy: Experiencing grant proposals from the funder's perspective	Bloch, J.	2018	Business and Professional Communication Quarterly
Philanthropy can be learned: A qualitative study of student experiences in experiential philanthropy courses	Li, H., Xu, C., & McDougale, L. M	2019	Philanthropy & Education
Philanthropy and civil society: Comparative perspectives on private solutions to public problems	Appe, S.	2020	Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice
Experiential philanthropy in China	Li, H., McDougale, L. M., & Gupta, A	2020	Journal of Public Affairs Education
Student philanthropy and community engagement: A program evaluation	Benz, T. A., Piskulich, J. P., Kim, S. E., Barry, M., & Havstad, J. C.	2020	Innovative Higher Education

The 18 articles are published in 11 journals across diverse disciplines (Figure 1). Journals focusing on nonprofit education (Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership; Philanthropy and Education), higher education (Academic Exchange Quarterly; Innovative Higher Education), nonprofit studies (Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly), discipline education (Journal of Public Affairs Education; Journal of Criminal Justice Education; Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work) and some other social science journals (International Journal of Case Method Research and Application; Human Service Organization: Management, Leadership and Governance; Business and Professional Communication Quarterly) welcome the topic of experiential philanthropy. Among these journals, Journal of Public Affairs Education (JP AE) publishes the

most experiential philanthropy papers. Six of the eighteen articles are published in JPAE. One potential explanation is that most of the authors' academic affiliations are in the public affairs discipline. In addition, the academic programs where the participating students enroll also impact the major journals that publish the article. With the emerging practice of experiential philanthropy, more articles emerge in nonprofit journals and education journals. It will broaden the audience other than public administration professors, such as nonprofit practitioners who are the potential recipients or funders of the gifts, as well as educators in classrooms across the discipline. As a result, it may attract funders to the field, support more practice in diverse academic programs, and ultimately enlarge the impact in communities and the nonprofit sector.

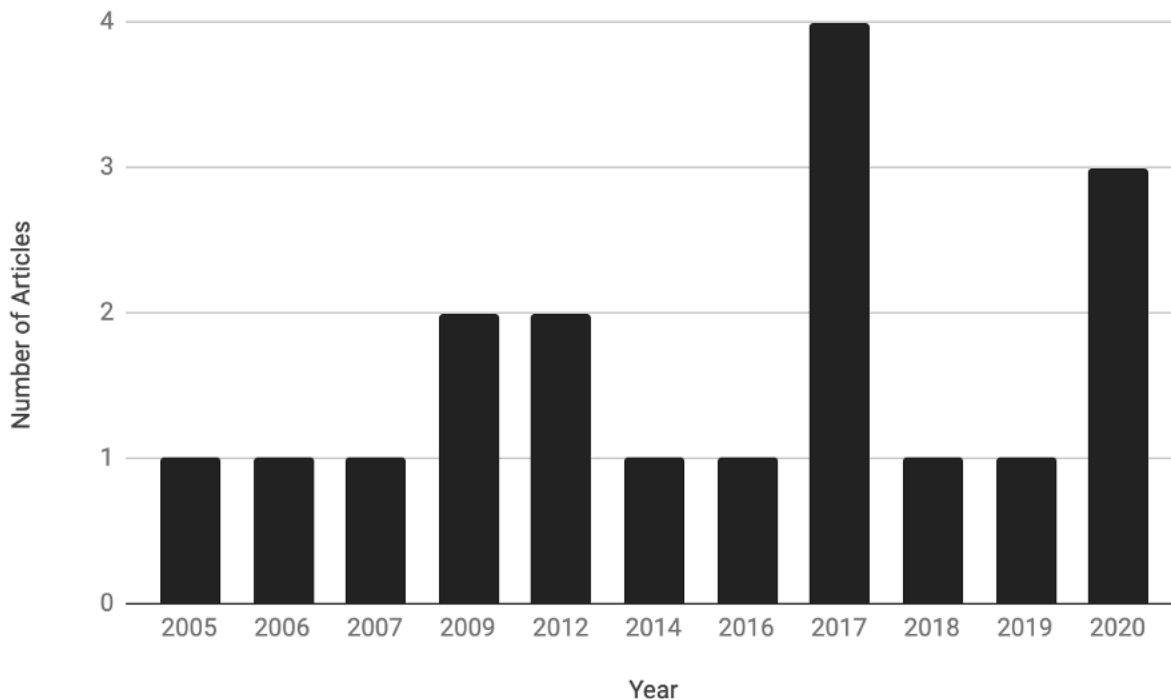
Figure 1. Number of Articles by Journal



The publication year distribution of the articles is shown in Figure 2. This figure shows that the earliest peer-reviewed paper on experiential philanthropy was published in 2005. A few studies were conducted in the first decade of the 21st century. The number of articles by year shows an

increasing trend of study in experiential philanthropy in recent years. 2017 and 2020 are the most fruitful years for research in experiential philanthropy.

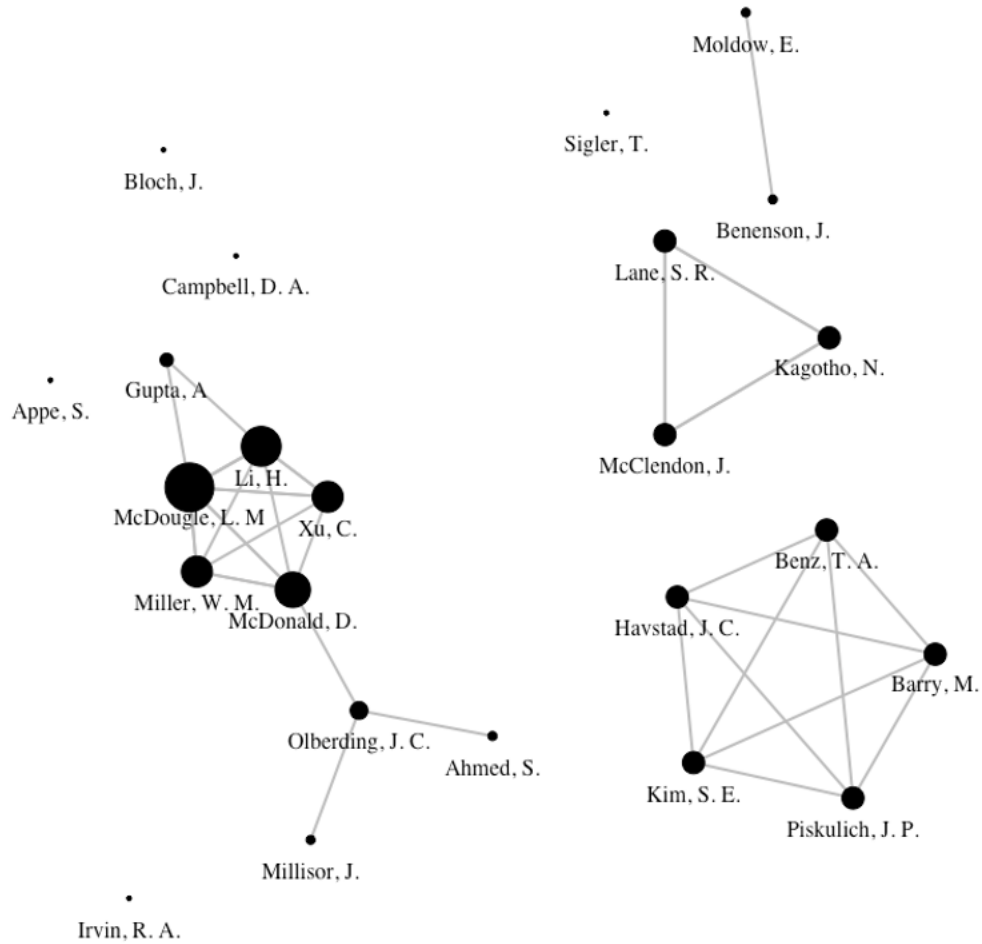
Figure 2. Number of Articles by Year



Co-authorship makes great contributions toward a fruitful field in experiential philanthropy.

Figure 3 shows the co-authorship network in the peer-reviewed articles. The nodes represent the authors. The size of the node indicates the frequency of the author’s work appears in the selected literature list. The larger the node, the more collaborators the author has. The edges represent co-author relationships. An edge between two nodes means the two authors have co-authored at least one publication in experiential philanthropy. Five authors work solely, while the other authors work in groups. An author has 3.25 collaborators on average. Lindsey McDougle, Huafang Li, and Danielle McDonald are the top three most active collaborators in the network.

Figure 3. Co-authorship Network



Research Themes

Several themes emerge from the 18 articles. A word cloud (Figure 4) generated with the 18 abstracts provides an objective view of the themes and keywords of the study in experiential philanthropy. Word clouds are a valuable way to visualize text-based data. It neatly highlights essential information among the lengthy text. In Figure 4, the larger a word's font appears, the higher its frequency across the eighteen abstracts. Besides student experiential philanthropy, the

is by discussing the concepts of experiential philanthropy. Meanwhile, the background theory that incubates experiential philanthropy lies in service learning. At the same time, current practices in the university classrooms present the implementation of experiential philanthropy. The fourth key theme of the literature is the efficacy of experiential philanthropy. It impacts not only students but also universities, communities, and the nonprofit sector.

The Concept of Experiential Philanthropy

Experiential philanthropy is an innovative service-learning pedagogy in higher education. In an experiential philanthropy project, students identify nonprofit organizations that are working on the social issues within their communities, then make the decisions to distribute the funds - directly or indirectly - into nonprofit organizations (Li et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018).

There are generally several tasks for an experiential philanthropy course. For instructors, the primary task is teaching students philanthropic and nonprofit management knowledge. The ultimate goal is to use philanthropy to overcome social issues (McDougale et al., 2017). For student participants, first of all, they need to learn basic management principles as in other non-experiential nonprofit education classes. In addition, a philanthropic view requires them to identify social problems and issues in communities. By making granting decisions, students will also learn skills to evaluate and award nonprofit organizations. Ultimately, experiential philanthropy pedagogy intends to teach students not only about philanthropy but also about social issues and social problems within their communities (Li et al., 2019; McDougale et al., 2017). It is an important strategy to engage students in the learning process while encouraging community engagement.

Generally speaking, there are two models of experiential philanthropy -- direct giving and indirect giving (Olberding, 2009). The direct-giving model allocates a certain amount of funds to a class or another group of students for the grant-making process. Then students evaluate proposals from applicant nonprofit organizations and make collective decisions about which ones to fund directly. The indirect-giving model instructs students to evaluate grant proposals submitted by nonprofit organizations and make funding recommendations to corporations or foundations in the real world.

Roots in Service-Learning

The roots of experiential philanthropy could be found in service-learning (Ricchio & Gardinier, 2016; Seher, 2014). Service-learning connects community service with the academic curriculum (Celio et al, 2011; Olberding & Hacker, 2015). It is a teaching approach that “integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection in order to enrich student learning experiences, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (Xu et al., 2018, p. 2).

Service-learning is grounded in active learning, which is a more general approach of teaching, emphasizing that students learn through evolving activities and “think about what they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. iii).

As a product of the university-community partnership, service-learning is one of the most popular community-based education strategies, which combines community engagement with academic objectives. Research has consistently indicated that service-learning is an effective teaching method to aid in achieving an array of student learning outcomes. It can have a positive impact on students’ academic learning and skill development by enriching students’ learning experiences (McDougle et al., 2017). Beyond that, students participating in service-learning

activities reveal a higher level of civic responsibility, as those activities help in building a better understanding of social issues and enhancing students' personal insights (McDougle et al., 2017).

Many professional disciplines such as agriculture, engineering, and social work are among the first to implement service-learning activities into pedagogical practice (Xu et al., 2018). Later on, it has been covered extensively in business and professional communication courses, before student philanthropy is addressed (Bolch, 2018). Nowadays, most universities incorporate some form of service-learning into their curriculums of various degree programs.

Experiential philanthropy is seen as a new and innovative form of service-learning pedagogy. The key difference between service-learning and experiential philanthropy is that service-learning requires “time and talents” from learners, while experiential philanthropy adds the “treasure” that comes from funders, such as foundations, universities, companies, government agencies, or even individuals (Benenson & Moldow, 2017, p. 887; Olberging, 2009). Similar to service-learning, experiential philanthropy combines skill and knowledge development, hands-on activities, community engagement, while most outstandingly, it allocates fundings and makes direct contributions to the community.

Current Practice of Experiential Philanthropy

An early estimation has predicted that there are more than one hundred experiential philanthropy initiatives at US colleges and universities (Stuart, 2012). The Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project at Northern Kentucky University is one of the longest-running ones. The project has been working for 19 years since 1999. NKU opens the program to all colleges, all disciplines, and the full range of NKU students, beginning with high school students taking courses for college credit

and continuing through graduate school (Holland & Votruba, 2002). Since its inception, 5,549 students who participated in the project have given out \$871,466 to 387 nonprofit organizations (Mayerson Annual Report, 2019). It provides rich data for experiential philanthropy research. Among the 18 peer-reviewed articles, 9 of them use data collected from the Mayerson Project. Another influential project is Pay It Forward, an initiative of the Kentucky, Michigan, and Ohio Campus Compacts. Since January 2010, Pay It Forward has engaged nearly 4,200 college students in 197 courses across 37 campuses (Benenson & Moldow, 2017). Similar to the Mayerson Project, Pay It Forward courses are offered to a variety of disciplines, departments, and organizational units, while some are multi-semester courses. For funding sources, two of the largest funders of experiential philanthropy in the United States - Once Upon a Time Foundation and Learning by Giving Foundation, have contributed millions of dollars to support diverse forms of experiential philanthropy projects.

Before 2019, very few studies on experimental philanthropy have focused on the research context outside of the United States. Experiential philanthropy has not become a significant component of nonprofit and philanthropic education in other countries. In 2019, the first experiential philanthropy study in China (Li et al., 2020) indicated a similar finding to what has been found in the United States. The experiential philanthropy courses increase Chinese students' awareness of social issues and nonprofit organizations while encouraging their interest in philanthropic education, activities, and even nonprofit career. In Appe's (2020) study, the graduate course about private philanthropy in a public affairs program provides students the opportunity to examine philanthropic behavior at a global scale, aiming to address social problems across the world. It advances a major debate that compares the merits of giving locally versus giving internationally in this experiential model. (Appe, 2020)

Efficacy of Experiential Philanthropy

A major theme of the current experiential philanthropy literature is the efficacy of this pedagogical approach. It benefits not only students but also universities, communities, and nonprofit sectors.

For students, experiential philanthropy strengthens their personal academic and professional skills. It enhances their learning capacity and interest in the curriculum, helps them apply course principles and develop their academic skills and knowledge (Li et al., 2019; Millisor & Olberding, 2009; McDougale et al., 2017). Professional skills such as information collection techniques, budgeting, and resource management will benefit their future careers (Benenson & Moldow, 2017; Bloch, 2018; McClendon et al., , 2016; Sigler, 2006). Also, a positive effect of experiential philanthropy on student civic engagement has been supported by the literature (Benenson & Moldow, 2017; Irvin, 2005; Li et al., 2019). After taking the course, students are more aware of social issues and problems in their communities (Ahmed & Olberding, 2007; Benz et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Millisor & Olberding, 2009; McDonald et al., 2017; McDonald & Olberding, 2012; McDougale et al., 2017). Their awareness of nonprofit organizations who are working on solving the problems is enhanced as well (Li et al., 2020; Millisor & Olberding, 2009; McDonald & Olberding, 2012; McDougale et al., 2017). At the same time, students' beliefs, values, intentions are positively impacted by their 'learning by giving' experience (Ahmed & Olberding, 2007; Li et al., 2019; McDougale et al., 2017; Olberding, 2012). They are more likely to make charitable donations, participate in volunteer activities, and serve on nonprofit boards. However, in Li et al.'s 2019 qualitative study, they find that for some students, engaging in experiential philanthropy is less likely to enhance their desire to contribute monetarily to nonprofit organizations (Li et al., 2019).

Some studies compare different student groups and find mixed results on the effectiveness of experiential philanthropy. Ahmed and Olberding (2007) find that in-career MPA students may not be the best target population. Undergraduate students - particularly in non-business disciplines- seem to be the population whose awareness, beliefs, values, and intentions are most likely to be increased by a student philanthropy project. Benenson and Moldow (2017) support that student philanthropy course activities have less of an effect on students who have previously participated in philanthropic activities. Besides, McDougle et al. (2017) and her team find that underclassmen are less likely than seniors to perceive that they gain value from participating in experiential philanthropy classes, while males and white students are less likely to believe that they benefit from the classes.

Besides students, experiential philanthropy benefits universities, communities, and nonprofit organizations as well. Kagotho et al. (2017) finds experiential philanthropy programs' potential for supporting and strengthening university-community partnerships. A large number of universities apply experiential philanthropy as a way to put into their course, student engagement, and the connections to the larger communities. The service-learning process benefits communities by allowing students to actively work toward improving their communities through the distribution of philanthropic funding (Xu et al., 2018). Ultimately, money spent within the community will alleviate some of the social issues. For the nonprofit sector, it increases the level of awareness that students have of local nonprofit organizations, and it gets more people learning about their missions. Many nonprofits, particularly smaller ones that depend on volunteers, and lack staff who can focus solely on fundraising, welcome assistance from students (Bolch, 2018). Meanwhile, it is a way to train the next generation of philanthropists to make strategic and smart philanthropic giving decisions.

Research Methodologies

The methodology applied in experiential philanthropy varies while sharing some common logic. As the experiential philanthropy programs are scattered in university classrooms in the early years, the *case study* is one of the most popular methods applied in earlier literature. Irvin's 2005 paper presents two cases of experiential philanthropy at University of Oregon, a freshman seminar sponsored by Wells Fargo and a graduate seminar sponsored by Faye & Lucille Stewart Foundation. By presenting the successful cases, the author calls for replication, which stimulates the increase of experiential philanthropy practice and research in later years. In 2006, Sigler published another case study on the Managing Change course at Northern Kentucky University, bringing the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project to the spotlight. The study found that the project helped students to see that real organizational change is ambiguous, complicated, and challenging. In 2007, another case study at Northern Kentucky University was published in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* (Ahmed & Olberding, 2007). This case study uses survey data from 2000 to 2005, assessing the short-term and long-term effects of the Mayerson project among different disciplines.

With the development of data availability, *quantitative methods* have been widely used in later literature. Twelve out of the 17 articles apply quantitative survey data. Some present descriptive analysis, while some present regression analysis. For example, in 2009, Millisor and Olberding quantitatively described a dozen student philanthropy programs and courses at colleges and universities in the United States. In other literature, descriptive analysis shows the characteristics of student participants, students' perception of the projects, and the effects of the projects

reflected by survey items (Benz et al., 2020; Campbell, 2014; Kagotho et al., 2017; McClendon et al., 2016; Olberding, 2009; Olberding, 2012). In addition, regression analysis explores the relationship between experiential philanthropy programs and student outcomes (Benenson & Moldow, 2017; Benz et al., 2020; McDonald & Olberding, 2012; McDougale et al., 2017). For example, in Benenson and Moldow's 2017 study, the multivariate regression analyses reveal that having direct contact with nonprofits, doing research into an issue area, assisting in writing grant proposals on behalf of organizations, serving as group leader or co-leader, and investing a large percentage of class time in the philanthropy project are activities that most strongly predict student confidence in philanthropic skills, abilities, and knowledge.

Besides quantitative methods, *qualitative methods* have been applied to the studies, mostly utilizing the supplemental qualitative responses in survey data (Campbell, 2014; Li et al., 2020; McDonald & Olberding, 2012; Olberding, 2009). In recent years, researchers have cast attention on the in-depth qualitative methods (Bloch, 2018; Li et al., 2019). In Li et al. (2019), the authors utilize computer-assisted technologies to mine data from students concerning their perceptions about participating in an experiential philanthropy course, finding similar results from prior research.

In addition, the *experimental method* is also applicable for some studies, seeing the experiential philanthropy program as an intervention to the target student groups. The research design is quasi-experimental in nature for the program. Thus, it reconfirms the causation of this pedagogical technique to the positive outcomes. For example, McDonald and Olberding's 2012 study examines the impact of student philanthropy on students' beliefs, interests, learning, and intended behavior by analyzing pretest and posttest data for criminal justice students who participated in a philanthropy experience (experimental group) relative to students who did not

participate (comparison group). The study finds that students who participated in the project are significantly more likely to be aware of local nonprofit organizations and social problems.

The *data source* for experiential philanthropy research mainly comes from surveys. For each experiential philanthropy project, students who participated in the program take at least one questionnaire after the course. Some projects measure the outcomes by collecting data with both pre-course and post-course surveys (Li et al., 2020; McDonald & Olberding, 2012; McDonald et al., 2017). Other studies survey alumni (Olberding, 2012), program administrators (Millisor & Olberding, 2009), community agencies (Kagotho et al., 2017), and other students who are not participants of the experiential philanthropy programs (McDonald & Olberding, 2012).

For *unit of analysis*, 13 out of 18 articles analyze based on individual students. Three articles analyze at the program and course level (Appe, 2020; Campbell, 2014; Millisor & Olberding, 2009). One article focuses on individual alumni (Olberding, 2012), while another one focuses on community agencies (Kagotho et al., 2017).

Research Limitations and Future Study

Previous research in experiential philanthropy share some common limitations.

First, current studies rely heavily on survey data. Although most studies have a decent sample size, participants are not randomly sampled. Meanwhile, a limitation of the survey is that it focuses on student perceptions of the effectiveness of their own experiential philanthropy experience. Thus, the generalizability of the findings in each article may be limited. Conducting

research utilizing a more heterogeneous sample would be an approach to develop future research on experiential philanthropy.

The second limitation is the lack of theory on experiential philanthropy. The research in experiential philanthropy has not been theoretical and conceptual as most of the studies are descriptive. Many theories used in experiential philanthropy come from service-learning or active learning. There is not a great deal of theoretical research that focuses on nonprofit education or philanthropic education. Developing a theory of experiential philanthropy would be a must-do for future researchers in the field.

The third limitation lies in the practical reality that the limited number of programs and projects is a result of limited sponsors. One of the biggest challenges for future researchers is to approach more funding sources. In past practice, funding is usually not sustainable. Longer commitments to experiential philanthropy are not available. So, the instructor has to find ways to fund the initiatives continuously. Finding funders who care enough about student learning, developing the next generation of philanthropists, and also benefiting the communities would be a challenge for future instructors and researchers.

Current literature focuses on the practice and efficacy of experiential philanthropy. It opens the door to many future research opportunities. For example, how to conceptualize and measure the impacts on all the stakeholders of the program – students, educators, universities, funders, organizations, and communities. Are there any differences among students in different academic programs? How does remote learning impact the practice and efficacy? What are the giving patterns of the students? Does student giving follow the foundations' giving principles? What are the insights from nonprofit organizations' perspectives as gift recipients? How does an institution

attract and sustain funding for the student philanthropy programs? What are the longer-term impacts of experiential philanthropy on the next generation of philanthropists, and how could that shape the nonprofit sector in future decades?

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