The Third Mission in Action: Universities-NGOs Collaboration as a Driver of Civic Engagement

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***Abstract**: In a period defined by democratic challenges, social fragmentation, and governance uncertainty, universities are increasingly expected to act as catalysts for civic responsibility and community resilience. The concept of the third mission – the societal engagement of higher education institutions – has consistently emerged as a vital framework for linking academic knowledge with civic practice. Within this mission, partnerships between universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offer innovative platforms for experiential learning and civic empowerment among public administration students, contributing to the development of socially responsible future professionals. This paper examines how NGO-university collaborations bring the third mission to life through service learning, community-based projects, and socially oriented internships. The analysis is based on several Bulgarian initiatives as Pro bono workshops, Internship with a Cause, "Expo with a cause", which embed civic participation and public value creation into the educational process. These models demonstrate how engagement with NGOs transforms students from passive recipients of knowledge into active contributors to local governance and social innovation. The study aims to: 1. Identify the institutional and social mechanisms that enable effective and sustainable NGO – university partnerships; 2. Assess the impact of service learning on students' civic competences, awareness, and professional identity; 3. Evaluate the outcomes of NGO involvement in students' practical learning experiences. 4. Analyze the mutual benefits of these collaborations for NGO (civil society) and the university (education). Drawing on qualitative case studies and semi-structured interviews with students, NGO representatives, and academic mentors, the findings indicate that NGO partnerships enhance the quality and relevance of public administration education. Students gain hands-on experience in problem-solving, policy implementation, and community engagement, while NGOs benefit from academic expertise and youth participation. This symbiotic relationship nurtures civic engagement, empathy, and a distinct sense of public purpose. The paper concludes that the third mission of universities should be strategically integrated into curricula and institutional policies. The integration of service learning and civic partnerships in public administration education can serve as an innovative approach that cultivates empathy, accountability, and social sustainability through active collaboration between academia and civil society. By partnering with NGOs, higher education institutions can act as proactive agents of social change, promoting civic engagement, building trust in society, and promoting more accountable and participatory governance.*

***Keywords:** third mission of universities; civic engagement; service-learning; NGO-university collaboration; public administration education; experiential learning*

Introduction

Modern societies are increasingly characterised by insecurity, social fragmentation and declining trust in institutions. In such an environment, universities face growing expectations not only to train professionals, but also to actively contribute to the development of civic engagement and societal sustainability. The increasing complexity of societal challenges, together with growing expectations for transparency, participation and social

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responsibility, creates new demands for higher education institutions, particularly for programmes preparing future public administration professionals. In this context, universities are no longer perceived solely as centres for knowledge transmission and academic research, but also as active actors contributing to social development and civic engagement. They are gradually establishing themselves as active participants with the ability to influence civic culture, social innovation and the development of local communities.

In this context, the concept of the third mission of universities is gaining an increasingly significant place in both academic and political discourse. Alongside traditional teaching and research functions, the third mission focuses on the public engagement of higher education institutions and their responsibility to create public value. While the concept has long been associated mainly with innovation, knowledge transfer and regional economic development, its social and civic dimensions have become increasingly visible in recent years. Universities are expected to build sustainable partnerships with external stakeholders, respond to societal needs and create opportunities for active citizenship. This transformation is particularly important in the field of public administration training, where the preparation of future professionals increasingly requires not only technical knowledge and administrative competences, but also ethical sensitivity, empathy, communication skills and civic responsibility.

It is here that cooperation between universities and NGOs emerges as a particularly valuable mechanism for linking academic learning to real societal challenges. Non-governmental organizations provide an environment in which students can directly engage in work on public causes, advocacy initiatives and projects with significant social impact. Through such partnerships, training goes beyond the audience and is associated with practical experience, reflection and active citizenship. Approaches such as service-learning, community-based learning, pro bono initiatives and socially oriented internships create opportunities for students to simultaneously develop professional competences and contribute to the public good. In this way, they are transformed from passive recipients of knowledge into active participants in the processes of social change and community development.

The increased interest in service-learning and civic-oriented education is part of the broader debate on the societal role of higher education in Central and Eastern European countries. Although universities in the region are increasingly recognising the importance of public engagement, the institutionalisation of service-learning and sustainable cooperation models between universities and non-governmental organisations still remain limited. In many cases, such initiatives depend on the individual activity of educators, informal partnerships or project-based cooperation, rather than being part of long-term institutional policies. Bulgaria is a particularly interesting context in this regard. While training in public administration has traditionally focused on theoretical preparation and administrative knowledge, there is a growing awareness of the need for future public officials to develop practical civic competences, an understanding of community dynamics and skills to interact with civil society organisations. In parallel, NGOs are increasingly seeking cooperation with universities as an opportunity to engage young people, increase the visibility of social causes and promote civic participation.

Against this background, this article examines how cooperation between universities and non-governmental organizations operationalizes the third mission of universities through civic-oriented educational practices in public administration training. The analysis focuses on several Bulgarian initiatives 1) Pro bono workshops, 2) Internship with a cause and 3) “Expo with a cause”, which integrate non-governmental organizations in the educational process and create opportunities for experiential and socially engaged learning. These practices are seen as examples of how civic participation and public value creation can be sustainably

integrated into the university environment.

The main objective of the study is to analyze the role of non-governmental organizations as active educational partners in the process of training future specialists in public administration. In this regard, the article seeks an answer to several interrelated research questions: How do partnerships between universities and NGOs contribute to the implementation of the third mission of universities? How does service-learning affect the development of civic engagement, ethical sensitivity and professional identity among students? What mutual benefits arise from cooperation between universities and civil society organisations? And how can such partnerships contribute to more responsible and participatory approaches in public administration training?

The article defends the thesis that structured partnerships between universities and non-governmental organizations represent not only additional educational activity, but an important mechanism for promoting civic engagement, forming socially responsible professionals and rethinking the relationship between higher education and societal needs. By integrating service-learning and civic partnerships into the educational process, universities can establish themselves as active agents of social change and contribute to building more resilient and participatory societies.

The article is structured in several main parts. The first part presents the theoretical framework related to the third mission of universities, civic engagement, service-learning and the role of non-governmental organizations in higher education. The second part examines the methodology of the study and presents the selected case studies. The third part is an analysis of the specific initiatives and a discussion of their importance for public administration training and the development of citizen-oriented governance models. In conclusion, the main conclusions on the potential of partnerships between universities and non-governmental organizations to strengthen the public role of higher education in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are formulated.

Literature Review

In recent decades, universities have been undergoing a substantial transformation under the influence of the development of the knowledge economy, rising societal expectations and increased demands for innovation, sustainability and regional development. As a result, higher education institutions are no longer seen solely as training and research institutions, but also as active actors in economic, social and civic development (Hadj Taieb, 2024). This transformation is gradually shifting the traditional model of the university as an ‘ivory tower’ towards the concept of a socially engaged university that actively interacts with society and participates in solving real societal problems (Bosanac et al., 2025).

The concept of the third mission arose as an extension of the traditional functions of universities. It covers a wide range of activities related to knowledge transfer, societal engagement, entrepreneurship, regional development and social impact (Secundo et al., 2017; Mariani et al., 2018, quoted in Hadj Taieb, 2024). The third mission reflects the changing role of universities as socially engaged and innovation-oriented institutions operating in increasingly complex societal ecosystems.

According to Hadj Taieb (2024), the third mission is closely linked to concepts such as an entrepreneurial university, a civic university and a regionally engaged university. These models underline the responsibility of universities not only to create and disseminate knowledge, but also to support regional innovation systems, foster cooperation with business and civil society, and contribute to sustainable development. Similarly, Goddard and

Vallance (2011) view the civic university as an institution deeply connected to the local community and the development of the region, which actively participates in solving societal problems through partnerships and co-creation of knowledge. Benneworth and Cunha (2015) also highlight the role of universities as drivers of social innovation and societal transformations through collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders.

The initial interpretations of the third mission are strongly related to the entrepreneurial university and the commercialization of knowledge. Clark (1998) describes entrepreneurial universities as institutions that transform their organizational structures, management models, and relationships with the external environment for greater adaptability, financial sustainability, and societal impact. Pflitsch and Menzel (2026) add that entrepreneurial universities are oriented towards economic development, commercialization of scientific results, and collaboration with external stakeholders through mechanisms such as technology transfer offices, incubators, and science parks. Under this model, universities are increasingly embracing entrepreneurial logic and aligning academic activities with the needs of the market and innovation environment.

These processes are closely related to the development of innovative systems and helix models. Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) formulated the Triple Helix model, which sees the interaction between universities, business and the state as the foundation of innovation ecosystems. Later, Carayannis and Campbell (2010) expanded this model through the Quadruple Helix and Quintuple Helix concepts, including civil society, media, culture and sustainable development as key elements of modern innovation processes. In this context, universities are starting to function as intermediaries between different societal systems and stakeholders, not just as knowledge producers.

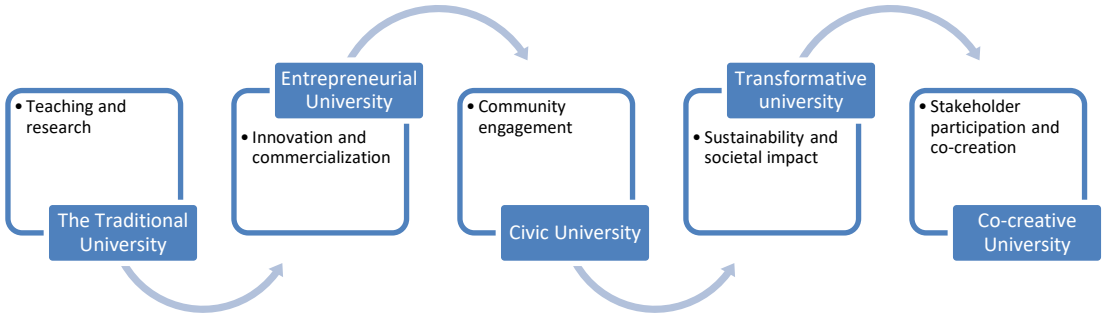
Modern literature shows a gradual shift from the purely economic interpretations of the third mission to broader social and sustainable perspectives. Pflitsch and Menzel (2026) point out that universities are increasingly becoming key players in sustainability transitions through transformative activities within the third mission aimed at solving complex societal problems and the so-called "wicked problems". A similar thesis develops and Trencher et al. (2014), according to which universities move beyond the traditional third mission to models of co-creation of solutions for sustainability through active participation in societal transformations. Fazey et al. (2021) also highlight the need to transform knowledge systems through interdisciplinarity, collaboration and the involvement of different societal actors in innovation and sustainable development processes.

In this regard, the concepts of Mode 3 universities and Third Space are becoming increasingly important. Pöcher et al. (2026) define Mode 3 universities as institutions that combine traditional disciplinary research (Mode 1) with interdisciplinary and application-oriented knowledge production (Mode 2), creating innovation ecosystems characterized by collaboration, flexibility and societal impact. Carayannis and Campbell (2010) see Mode 3 as a model based on the interaction between different modes of knowledge, innovation and social systems, allowing for higher adaptability and transdisciplinarity.

According to Pöcher et al. (2026) Universities increasingly function as ‘innovation hubs’ that actively contribute to addressing social and economic challenges through networked and transdisciplinary approaches. In this context, the Third Space concept describes an organizational environment supporting collaboration between academia, the public sector, industry and civil society. These structures promote interdisciplinary work, hybrid professional roles and flexible management models that allow universities to participate more effectively in societal transformations.

The development of the concept of the third mission shows a gradual expansion of the role of universities

- from traditional training and research institutions to socially engaged and transformative actors. This evolution is presented in Figure 1.



Source: *Author's figure based on the analysed literature and theoretical frameworks discussed in the reviewed sources.*

Fig. 1 Evolution of the university third mission

The Figure 1 illustrates the shift from the university's traditional model to more complex forms of societal interaction based on innovation, civic engagement, collaboration with stakeholders and co-creation of societal value. It is within this transformation that service-learning and university-NGO collaboration are established as practical mechanisms for the operationalization of the third mission.

In parallel, literature increasingly links the third mission to the concepts of civic engagement, university social responsibility and service-learning. Bosanac et al. (2025) distinguish two main dimensions of the third mission: entrepreneurial and civic. While the entrepreneurial dimension focuses on innovation, competitiveness and economic development, the civic dimension focuses on societal responsibility, democratic participation, social well-being and interaction with local communities.

In this context, service-learning is seen as one of the most promising pedagogical frameworks for the implementation of the third mission. According to Bringle and Hatcher (1995) and Eyler and Giles (1999), service-learning is an educational approach that integrates academic learning with meaningful community service and structured reflection. Unlike volunteering, service-learning includes clearly formulated educational goals, pedagogical design, integration into the learning process, and reciprocity between the university and the community (Jacoby, 2015).

Modern research also highlights the importance of partnerships between universities and NGOs as a mechanism for the implementation of the third mission. Goryunova et al. (2025) consider these partnerships as a form of strategic cooperation integrating educational, social and civic functions. Through structured interaction with socially engaged NGOs, students participate in solving real societal problems, develop professional competences, civic responsibility and practical experience.

Similar ideas are found in Roversi et al. (2025) criticising one-way models of knowledge transfer and stressing the need for co-creation, stakeholder involvement and co-development of solutions. According to the authors, universities increasingly function as spaces for collaboration, open innovation and social transformation, in which different societal actors participate on an equal footing in the processes of knowledge creation and

application.

The role of universities as actors in sustainable development and institutional accountability is also increasingly highlighted in literature. Biloslavo and Schaebs (2025) argue that sustainability reporting can strengthen the third mission by increasing transparency, societal legitimacy and stakeholder engagement. The authors present the concept of Joint Sustainability Reports as a tool for collectively and digitally supported consideration of the societal impact of universities.

Another important aspect in the literature is the measurement and evaluation of the third mission. Despite the growing importance of the concept, there is still a lack of universally accepted indicators and assessment frameworks. Hadj Taieb (2024) identified three main approaches: integrating the third mission into the overall assessment of university performance, measuring the third mission as an overall concept and evaluating its individual dimensions. Secundo et al. (2017) develop a framework for measuring the third mission through the intellectual capital approach, focusing on the human, structural and relational capital of universities.

In this context, Dipierro and Toma (2025) point out that universities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate efficiency in both research and third mission activities with limited resources and enhanced accountability requirements. Their research on British universities shows that the third mission is gradually becoming a key dimension in institutional assessment and competitiveness.

Despite the growing importance of the third mission, a number of studies show that its practical implementation remains uneven and institutionally challenging. Ndimbo and Nkwabi (2025) found that despite the inclusion of societal engagement in the strategic missions of universities, it often remained less prioritised than training and research. The authors identified a number of institutional barriers, including underfunding, excessive academic workload, a lack of clear policies, limited incentives and a weak link between research and societal impact.

The study also emphasizes that the effective implementation of the third mission requires reciprocity and reciprocity in the relationship between the university and society. Instead of a one-way transfer of knowledge, modern models of societal engagement imply partnerships based on cooperation, trust and joint problem-solving. Such a perspective is particularly relevant for service-learning and partnerships between universities and NGOs, where educational, civic and social functions take place simultaneously.

Similarly, Uddin and Cordery (2026) stress the importance of multi-actor cooperation in building accountability, co-creating solutions and involving beneficiaries in the activities of non-governmental organisations. According to the authors, sustainable and socially responsible models are built through partnerships based on reciprocity, adaptability and co-management. These conclusions are especially applicable to modern universities, which are increasingly implementing their third mission through partnerships with civic organizations, local communities and public institutions.

In general, literature shows that the third mission has transformed from a peripheral university function into a strategic dimension of modern higher education. Today's universities are increasingly expected to function as innovation hubs, civic actors, leaders in sustainable development and mediators of social transformation. The analyzed studies consistently emphasize the importance of interdisciplinarity, collaboration with stakeholders, sustainable orientation, service-learning and partnerships between universities and non-governmental organizations as key mechanisms for realizing the societal impact of higher education.

Based on the theoretical approaches and empirical studies analysed, a conceptual model of university-

NGO collaboration can be derived as a mechanism for realising the university's third mission through service-learning, experiential learning and civic engagement, as presented in Figure 2.



Source: *Author's figure based on the analysed literature and theoretical frameworks discussed in the reviewed sources.*

Fig 2. Conceptual model of university-NGO collaboration within the framework of the university third mission

Methodology

This study was developed within the framework of qualitative research design aimed at analyzing the role of partnerships between universities and non-governmental organizations in the context of the third mission of higher education and the application of service-learning approaches in public administration training. The research is based on the understanding that modern universities increasingly function as socially engaged institutions that build sustainable links with the external environment through cooperation with civic organizations, local communities and public institutions.

The research focuses on university-NGO cooperation practices implemented through experiential learning, service-learning and student civic engagement initiatives. The main focus is on three community-engaged initiatives, "Pro bono workshops", "Internship with a cause" and "Expo with a cause", implemented in the training of students in public administration. They are seen as examples of the operationalization of the third mission by creating real partnerships between the academic environment and civil society organizations.

The study uses the qualitative case study approach as it allows in-depth analysis of real social and educational processes in their natural environment. The choice of this approach is determined by the need to track the interactions between universities, students and non-governmental organizations, as well as the impact of these interactions on the development of civic competences, social engagement and community-engaged learning.

The three initiatives studied represent different forms of university-NGO collaboration and experiential civic engagement. "Pro bono workshops" involve the participation of students in practice-oriented activities and advisory formats related to real societal cases and the needs of non-governmental organisations. "Internship with a cause" focuses on integrating civic and social engagement into students' internship practices by working on real societal issues and initiatives by civil society organisations. "Expo with a cause" creates a space for direct interaction between students and NGOs by presenting social causes, volunteering initiatives and opportunities for active citizenship.

The empirical part of the study is based on several main data sources:

- training and project documents related to the initiatives;
- monitoring of activities and interactions between participants;
- student outputs, reflections and feedback;

- partnership models between the university and non-governmental organizations;
- public communications, initiatives and activities implemented within the educational formats.

The method of documentary analysis makes it possible to examine the objectives, organizational framework and educational logic of the initiatives under consideration. By monitoring and analysing students' participation, levels of engagement and interaction with external stakeholders, the study explores the development of practically applicable civic and professional competences. Particular attention is paid to the way students participate in real social causes, interact with non-governmental organizations and apply academic knowledge in a practical context.

The analytical framework of the study is built on several interrelated conceptual directions: the theory of the third mission of universities; the concepts of civic university and transformative university; service-learning and experiential learning approaches; collaborative governance and stakeholder engagement; university-NGO partnerships as a social impact mechanism.

The analysis uses a thematic approach that identifies main categories and models related to: civic engagement; development of sound oriented; inter-institutional cooperation; social impact; participation of students in real social processes; the formation of civic responsibility and public value orientation.

The study does not claim statistical representativeness, but aims at analytical and conceptual depth. The main objective is to explore how the practices of university-NGO collaboration can function as a mechanism for the implementation of the third mission of universities and as a tool for the development of socially engaged public administration education.

In this context, the methodology makes it possible to identify both the potentials and limitations of such initiatives, including organisational challenges, the need for institutional support, the sustainability of partnerships and opportunities to integrate service-learning approaches into public administration training.

Results

A review and analysis of the three practices has been conducted, and despite the differences between them, the analysis shows a similar logic of interaction between the university, students and civil society organizations. On the basis of the practices at issue, a summary process model of university-NGO collaboration can be derived from the civic-oriented educational practices presented in Figure 3.



Source: *Author's figure*

Fig 3. Process model of university-NGO collaboration through civic-oriented educational practices

The figure presents the general interaction logic observed in the practices under consideration. The process begins with the identification of a real social or organizational need and goes through building a partnership between the university and the civil sector, active participation of the students and meaningful oriented activities that generate concrete meaningful applicable outputs and societal impact. Reflection and feedback mechanisms function as a key element for connecting experiential learning with the development of civic responsibility and professional competences.

1. Pro bono workshops as a university-NGO cooperation practice

The Pro bono workshops practice was developed within the framework of the international BEESE Pro Bono Project, jointly implemented by TimeHeroes Foundation and the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) in the period 2019-2020. The main idea of the initiative is related to the development of skills-based volunteering (volunteering based on professional skills), where students, academic lecturers and business professionals work together to solve real-world problems of NGOs.

The practice is based on the concept of pro bono volunteering, where participants provide knowledge, expertise and practical solutions for the benefit of organizations with a public cause. The report highlights that this type of volunteering has a significantly higher added value for organisations compared to traditional forms of volunteering, as it provides professional support in areas such as communication, marketing, strategic planning, management and fundraising.

The model of work is built on a partnership between a university, an intermediary organization and a non-governmental sector. TimeHeroes acts as a mediator and coordinator between organizations, students and corporate mentors, while the UNWE supports the process of student selection, communication and engagement.

The practice involves three different forms of pro bono pilots - short, medium and long-term, which vary in duration, complexity of tasks and level of engagement of participants. Regardless of the differences between them, all formats follow a similar logic of organization and conduct.

The process begins with the selection of a non-governmental organization or a societal issue for student teams to work on. Organisations apply through an open call where they present a specific challenge or need related to their activity. Within the short-term pilot, students work with organizations such as the Ideas Factory Association, Alzheimer Bulgaria and Generations Together Foundation. Ideas Factory sets a task related to the promotion of social initiatives and volunteering activities, Alzheimer Bulgaria is looking for ideas for better public awareness and communication on dementia and support for the elderly, and Generations Together Foundation is working on issues related to intergenerational interaction and social inclusion.

The mid-term pilot was implemented in partnership with the National Polytechnic Museum in Sofia, where student teams developed proposals to attract more young visitors and young employees to the museum. Within the long-term online format, participants develop a simple oriented funding handbook for NGOs in Bulgaria, including an analysis of funding opportunities through foundations, corporate programs, European projects, crowdfunding and public support mechanisms.

The next stage is the selection of students. Candidates submit a CV and a motivation letter in which they justify their wish to participate. Selection criteria include motivation, volunteering experience, communication skills, digital competences and the ability to work in a team. Students receive a preliminary briefing, during which

they get acquainted with the organizations, the specific cases, the expected results and the role of the corporate mentors.

An essential element of the practice is the involvement of corporate mentors - business professionals with experience in marketing, management, communications, CSR and project activities. They support student teams through guidance, counselling and practical advice, playing the role of facilitator and mentor in the work process.

Pro Bono Workshop itself is conducted in the form of intensive practical work in teams. Students analyze the organization's problem, explore its online presence and environment, generate ideas, seek additional information, and develop practical solutions. Tasks include:

- analysis of the problem;
- identification of key challenges;
- brainstorming and idea generation;
- development of proposals;
- preparation of a final presentation and recommendations to the organization.

The work is carried out in small interdisciplinary teams, with participants distributing tasks according to their own skills and competences. In some cases, workshops are held directly in the organization space, allowing students to immerse themselves in the real environment and observe the specific context of the problem. For example, the mid-term pilot is organized at the National Polytechnic Museum in Sofia and starts with a tour of the museum and environmental analysis, which helps generate more realistic solutions.

In the long-term online format during the pandemic, the work is carried out through MS Teams, and the process includes a series of online meetings, stand-alone work and additional training sessions by mentors. This model shows that the pro bono approach can be successfully adapted to a digital educational environment.

The final stage of each workshop includes presentation of the developed solutions to the representatives of the organizations and discussion on their applicability. The final results include presentations, communication strategies, recommendations, analyses or practical handbooks.

Assessment of the practice is carried out through surveys, discussions and feedback from students, mentors and organizations. Participants report as main benefits:

- development of teamwork skills;
- improvement of communication and organisational competences;
- enhancement of problem-solving abilities;
- interaction with professionals;
- increased sense of social value and contribution.

The initiative illustrates the potential of university–NGO collaboration to serve as a mechanism for operationalizing the universities' third mission through the creation of real forms of socially engaged learning. The pro bono model connects academic knowledge with real societal needs and creates a space for students to actively participate in processes of public importance. Besides educational value, the initiative also generates a concrete social effect by supporting non-governmental organizations, cultural institutions and civic causes.

2. "Internship with a cause" as a practice for the implementation of the university's third mission

The "Internship with a cause" initiative is an innovative model for integrating service-learning, experiential learning and university-NGO collaboration into public administration training. The practice was

developed by the Department of Public Administration at the University of National and World Economy (UNWE) as part of efforts to link academic learning with real societal processes and socially significant causes.

The initiative is aimed at students from the specialty of Public Administration who carry out their compulsory pre-graduate internship in non-governmental organisations working in various public fields - education, social services, health, ecology, youth activities, human rights and civic participation. The practice is based on the understanding that the preparation of future public administrators should go beyond the traditional administrative model and involve real participation in social processes, working with communities and interacting with the civil sector.

The main concept of "Internship with a cause"is to transform the pre-graduate internship from a formal requirement into a socially educational experience. Instead of students performing only administrative activities in institutions, the initiative directs them to participate in social causes and real social processes, where they can apply theoretical knowledge from their studies in a practical environment.

The practice is fully in line with the formal requirements for conducting a pre-graduate internship in the specialty of Public Administration. The internship has a minimum duration of 120 astronomical hours, and there is a possibility for flexible distribution of working time, remote form of work and combined formats according to the specifics of the organization and capabilities of the students. This allows for higher adaptability and wider inclusion of students who combine study, work and volunteering.

A particularly important element of the initiative is the partnership with TimeHeroes, the largest volunteering platform in Bulgaria. Through the platform, students gain access to a wide network of over 1000 non-governmental organizations and volunteer initiatives in various public spheres. This partnership functions as a mediation mechanism between the university and the civic sector and significantly expands the opportunities for community-oriented learning. The implementation process of the "Internship with a cause" initiative, including the main stages, is presented in Figure 4.



Source: *Author's figure*

Fig 4. Internship with a cause implementation process

The selection of students is carried out by assessing motivation, academic performance and interest in social and societal issues. In parallel, a selection of non-governmental organizations is carried out, which can

provide a real environment for practical training and participation in public causes.

After the selection, students undergo an introductory training aimed at acquainting themselves with the role of the non-governmental sector, the specifics of civil society organizations and the basic principles of working in a socially engaged environment. The learning element is essential as it allows students to understand the differences between traditional administrative work and work in an NGO sector, where higher adaptability, creativity and inter-institutional interaction are often required.

The actual part of the internship is related to participation in real projects and organizational processes. Students engage in activities such as: development of administrative documents; participation in communication campaigns; organizational and project activities; coordination with partners; study of good practices; development of internal rules and procedures; participation in social and educational initiatives, etc.

The practice allows students to work in a dynamic and innovative environment different from traditional administrative structures. This creates conditions for the development of both professional competences and civic skills and social sensitivity.

A particularly telling example is the internship at the Generation Programme Foundation, where the student participates in the development of a comprehensive internship programme for the organisation. Within the framework of the internship are developed: internal procedures; application forms; descriptions of internship positions; communication documents; peer-to-peer offers to universities; feedback and reporting models.

The process of working is carried out remotely through digital platforms such as Google Docs, Google Meet and e-mail correspondence, which demonstrates the possibility of service-learning practices to be successfully adapted to the digital environment.

The results of the initiative show several key effects. First of all, students acquire community-oriented learning related to:

- teamwork;
- organisational and communication skills;
- administrative coordination;
- project management;
- document management;
- digital competences;
- stakeholder engagement.

Secondly, the initiative contributes to strengthening the capacity of NGOs by involving motivated students who provide new ideas, administrative support and community-oriented solutions.

Thirdly, “Internship with a cause” contributes to the development of sustainable partnerships between universities, NGOs and public institutions. Through direct interaction between the academic environment and society, the initiative creates opportunities for socially engaged learning, civic participation and long-term stakeholder collaboration within the framework of the university’s third mission. It is particularly important that the initiative promotes the development of civic responsibility and public value orientation among students. Working on real social causes increases social engagement, sensitivity to social problems and motivation to participate in processes of public importance.

In this sense, the “Internship with a cause” can be seen as an example of transforming the pre-graduate internship from an administrative requirement into a socially engaged learning model that simultaneously supports

students' professional preparation, the development of civic competences and the university's societal impact.

3. "Expo with a cause" as a civic engagement practice and university-NGO collaboration

"Expo with a cause"is a simple oriented educational format developed as a mechanism for connecting students with the civic sector through direct interaction with non-governmental organisations and participation in real societal causes. The practice is part of a broader concept of developing a university environment aimed at civic engagement, service-learning and socially responsible education. The format combines elements of experiential learning, stakeholder engagement and project-based learning and creates a space for students to actively participate in societal processes.

The initiative is organized as an exhibition of civic organizations, within which representatives of the non-governmental sector present their causes, activities and opportunities for inclusion to students. The main objective is to create a direct link between young people and organisations working on social, environmental, educational, health and human rights topics, thereby promoting volunteering, internships, mini-projects and civic activity.

The format of the event is structured in several successive stages. Prior to the exhibition, students receive preliminary tasks related to researching organizations through their sites and social networks. They analyze the main causes, campaigns and communication approaches of organizations and formulate questions related to their activities, work with volunteers, visibility and challenges.

During the event, the organizations have information stands with promotional materials, brochures and visual elements, and their representatives present their activities through short introductions and direct conversations with students. Students are organized into small teams that go through a speed-dating rotary model, visiting each stand alternately within predetermined time slots.

During these meetings, students ask questions, collect information about causes and analyze:

- the main issues addressed by the organisations;
- the results achieved;
- current challenges;
- opportunities for volunteering, internships and civic participation;
- communication approaches used to engage different audiences.

Rotational work is organised through a clear allocation of roles in the teams – moderator, protocol officer and time manager. This allows for a structured collection and analysis of information and at the same time develops communication skills, teamwork and organizational interaction.

Upon completion of the rotations, the student teams work on synthesizing the collected information and prepare short presentations and alternative practical recommendations to the organizations. Feedback includes:

- ideas for improving public visibility;
- proposals for more effective communication on social networks;
- opportunities to attract volunteers;
- ideas for campaigns and events;
- suggestions for improving outreach to youth audiences.

Thus, students do not remain solely in the role of observers, but function as active participants and communication consultants, generating practical solutions and ideas for the development of organizations.

The first edition of “Expo with a cause” was organized as part of the training in the course ‘Civil Society Institutions’. It involved organizations working in different social spheres:

- National association of volunteers in the republic of Bulgaria – volunteering and disaster and crisis response activities;
- Concordia Bulgaria – working with children and young people in vulnerable situations;
- TimeHeroes – developing volunteering and civic engagement;
- Every Dog Matters – protection and care of stray animals;
- You are not alone – support for people in need and social causes;
- For the Earth – environmental initiatives and sustainable development.

Within the first edition, students discuss real societal issues, analyze organizations' communication strategies, and develop ideas to increase their public visibility. Some of the students find specific opportunities for volunteering and internships during the event itself.

The second edition of “Expo with a cause” significantly expanded the format to include organisations active in the fields of human rights, social inclusion, youth policies and public health:

- Amnesty International Bulgaria – human rights protection and civic campaigns;
- SOS Community Support Centre – working with children and families at risk;
- Maria’s World Foundation – support for people with intellectual disabilities;
- The Future Now Association – youth empowerment and non-formal education;
- Giraffe Foundation – developing empathy, supporting communities and volunteering;
- Endometriosis and Reproductive Health Foundation – raising awareness and supporting women with endometriosis.

The second edition applied an even more experiential learning approach. Some organizations use interactive and simulation methods to present their causes. A particularly telling example is the use of the menstrual pain simulator, through which students experience physical sensations associated with chronic pain in endometriosis. Such approaches turn social and health topics into a personal experience and support the development of empathy and social sensitivity.

An important role within the initiative is played by the active participation of students as generators of ideas and mediators between the university and the civil sector. They analyze the work of organizations, offer practical solutions, participate in discussions and develop proposals for communication campaigns and improving the public presence of organizations.

The initiative demonstrates that such formats can successfully support the development of real partnerships with civic organizations while integrating socially engaged learning into the academic environment as part of the university’s broader societal role. “Expo with a cause” creates an opportunity for students to connect theoretical knowledge with real societal processes, develop reasonably applicable competences and build a higher degree of civic responsibility and public value orientation. A comparative overview of the three analysed practices as models for implementing the university’s third mission through university-NGO collaboration and service-learning is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the three practices as models for the implementation of the university’s third mission through university-NGO collaboration and service-learning

Criterion	Pro bono workshops	"Internship with a cause"	"Expo with a cause"
Main format	Short- and medium-term oriented courses	Long-term pre-graduate internship in NGOs	Interactive NGO expo and networking format
Main objective	Solving real organizational problems through skill-based volunteering	Integrating civic engagement into internship practice	Connecting students with the civil sector and public causes
Type of training	Experiential learning; project-based learning	Service-learning; experiential learning	Experiential learning; stakeholder engagement
Duration	From one-day to multi-month formats	Minimum 120 hours	Short-term event (2-3 hours)
Main actors	Students, NGOs, corporate mentors	Students, NGOs, academic coordinators	Students, NGO representatives
Role of students	Analysts, problem-solvers, communication consultants	Internship Programs and Interactions	Active participants, analysts, communication consultants
Role of NGOs	Setting real cases and needs	Provides a community-oriented work environment	Present causes, initiatives and opportunities for participation
Role of the University	Coordination, selection and organisational support	Organization, academic control and partnerships	Organisation, moderation and integration in the learning process
Inclusion of external stakeholders	Corporate mentors and civic organizations	Civil organisations and the public sector	Civil society organisations and voluntary networks
Basic approach	Skill-based volunteering	Civic-oriented internship model	Civic engagement and awareness model
Type of interaction	Working on a specific problem and generating solutions	Long-term participation in organizational processes	Short structured interactions with multiple organizations
Main activities	Analysis, brainstorming, solution development and presentations	Project work, administrative activities, campaigns, coordination	Discussions, cause analysis, feedback and campaign ideas
Competences developed	Teamwork, communication, problem-solving, project thinking	Administrative skills, communication, project management, civic responsibility	Communication, stakeholder interaction, empathy, civic awareness
Element of service-learning	Average	Strongly expressed	Medium to high
Element of civic engagement	Strong	Strong	Very strong
Practical focus	High	Very high	High
Social impact	Support for specific NGOs and causes	Support for organisational capacity and public initiatives	Increasing visibility and civic activity
Type of results	Presentations, strategies, phrase applicable recommendations	Real work on projects and organizational processes	Ideas for campaigning, networking and volunteering
Main partners	NGOs, business volunteers	NGOs, mentors	NGOs, beneficiery
Connection with the third mission	University-society collaboration through expertise sharing	Institutionalized civic-oriented internship model	Civic ecosystem and stakeholder engagement model
Main contribution to students	Practical experience and work on real cases	Genuine professional and civic engagement	Increased social sensitivity and civic awareness

Criterion	Pro bono workshops	"Internship with a cause"	"Expo with a cause"
Main contribution to NGOs	Consulting and expert support	Administrative and project capacity	Increased public visibility and access to young volunteers

Source: *Author's table*

Comparative analysis shows that the three practices use different organizational and pedagogical formats, but share a common logic of interaction between university, students and civil society organizations. Despite the differences in duration and degree of engagement, all initiatives create community-oriented environments for experiential learning and civic participation. This also allows the specific benefits for the main stakeholders presented in the following table 2 to be identified.

Table 2. Main benefits of the Pro bono workshops, "Internship with a cause" and "Expo with a cause" practices for students, NGOs and academia

Practice	For students	For NGOs	For the academic environment
Pro bono workshops	The development of advanced oriented skills; working on real cases; Interaction with corporate mentors; development of communication and problem-solving capabilities; Experience in teamwork and project-based work	Access to practical solutions and ideas; expert and communication support; new perspectives and Gen Z ideas; improving visibility and organisational processes	Integrating skills-based volunteering into training; development of sound oriented educational models; Expansion of university-NGO-business collaboration
"Internship with a cause"	A real-life oriented experience; development of administrative and organizational skills; building professional contacts; increasing civic responsibility; better preparation for professional realization	Access to motivated trainees; administrative and project support; development of organisational capacity; New Ideas and Scenic Applicable Solutions	Strengthening the relationship between theory and practice; operationalization of a third mission; building sustainable partnerships with the civil sector
"Expo with a cause"	Increased social sensitivity; direct contact with civil society organizations; development of stakeholder communication skills; Awareness of opportunities for civic engagement and volunteering	Increased public visibility; access to youth audiences; possibility to attract volunteers and trainees; feedback and communication campaign ideas	Creating civic engagement ecosystem in a university environment; strengthening public engagement in training; Development of interactive and experiential learning formats

Source: *Author's table*

In addition to generating various benefits for students, organizations and the academic environment, the practices under consideration place students in different roles within university-NGO collaboration. It is the nature of these roles that determines the different types of engagement, learning outcomes and stakeholder interaction.

Table 3. Student roles and engagement models in the three practices

Practice	The main role of the student	Type of engagement	Learning outcomes	Interaction level
Pro bono workshops	Consultant / Problem-solver	Skill-based volunteering; project-based engagement	Problem-solving skills; teamwork; communication; creative thinking; stakeholder interaction	High level of interaction with NGOs and mentors
"Internship with a cause"	Intern / Civic Participant	Long-term experiential and service-learning engagement	Administrative and organizational skills; civic responsibility; project management; practical professional experience	Prolonged and deep organizational interaction
"Expo with a cause"	Stakeholder Analyst/Communication Mediator	Short-term civic and stakeholder engagement	Civic awareness; communication skills; empathy; stakeholder analysis; public engagement	Intensive short-term interaction with multiple organizations

Source: *Author's table*

The comparative analysis shows that the three practices engage students in different but complementary roles within university-NGO collaboration, as presented in Table 3. While Pro bono workshopsfocus on problem-solving and community-oriented learning activities, Internship with a Cause creates the conditions for deeper organisational and civic engagement through continued participation in a real work environment. "Expo with a Cause", for its part, functions as a gateway model for initial contact with the civic sector and the development of civic awareness and stakeholder communication stakeholders. Despite the differences in the organizational format, duration and intensity of interactions, all initiatives create conditions for civic engagement, stakeholder interaction and experiential learning. The results show that university-NGO collaboration functions not only as a mechanism for predictive oriented education, but also as an ecosystem-based model for the implementation of the university's third mission. On this basis, the next part examines in more depth the competence, organizational and service-learning dimensions of the analysed practices.

Discussion

The analysis of the three practices shows that university-NGO collaboration does not function as an isolated interaction between a university and civil society organizations, but as a broader stakeholder ecosystem involving multiple interrelated actors, forms of collaboration and mechanisms for co-creation of societal value. Within this ecosystem, students take an active mediating role between the academic environment, the civic sector and society, as illustrated in Figure 5.



Source: *Author's figure*

Fig. 5 Stakeholder ecosystem generated through university-NGO collaboration and civic-oriented educational practices

On the other hand, the different models of university-NGO collaboration develop specific but complementary competences that are particularly relevant for the preparation of future public administration professionals. In addition to the traditional administrative knowledge, the initiatives support the development of communication skills, stakeholder interaction, civic responsibility and community-oriented approaches needed to work in a complex and networked social environment.

The identification of the developed competences is made by qualitative analysis of the student activities, monitoring of the interactions during the practices, analysis of the products developed by the students, the feedback from the participants and the specifics of the tasks performed within each initiative. Competences are not seen as formally measured by standardised tools, but as analytically derived results from participation-based and experiential learning processes. The analysis is based on the relationship between the nature of the activities, the level of engagement and the types of interactions with stakeholders, as presented in Table 4. A competency-oriented interpretative approach was used, focusing on simple observable learning outcomes and civic engagement dimensions.

Table 4. Competences developed through different practices

Competence	Pro bono workshops	"Internship with a cause"	"Expo with a cause"
Communication skills	✔	✔	✔
Stakeholder management	✔	✔	✔
Civic responsibility	✔	✔✔	✔✔✔
Project management	✔✔	✔✔✔	✔
Empathy	✔	✔✔	✔✔✔
Administrative skills	✔	✔✔✔	✔
Teamwork	✔✔✔	✔✔	✔✔

Problem-solving	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔	✔
Public engagement	✔	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔
Organizational adaptability	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔	✔
Reflective learning	✔	✔ ✔	✔ ✔
Social sensitivity	✔	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔

Source: *Author's table*

Evidence shows that the three practices develop different competence profiles depending on the nature and intensity of interaction with the civil sector. "Internship with a cause" creates the conditions for the development of a community-oriented administrative and organizational environment through continuous participation in a real working environment, while "Expo with a cause" has a stronger impact on civic awareness, empathy and public engagement. Pro bono workshopsfocuses on problem-solving, teamwork and stakeholder-oriented communication. This shows that combining different formats of service-learning and experiential learning can help build a more complex competency profile for public administration students.

The analysis of the initiatives at issue shows that they contain, to varying degrees, the main features of the service-learning approach. Despite differences in the form, duration and intensity of interactions, all three practices combine academic learning with participation in real societal processes and interaction with external stakeholders.

As service-learning represents one of the main theoretical frameworks of this study, it is necessary to consider the analysed practices through the main dimensions of this pedagogical approach. This makes it possible to assess the extent to which different initiatives integrate reflection, reciprocity, community orientation and experiential learning.

Table 5. Service-learning dimensions across the three practices

Dimension	Pro bono workshops	"Internship with a cause"	"Expo with a cause"
Reflection	Moderate	Strong	Moderate
The real community problem	Strong	Strong	Strong
Reciprocity	Strong	Strong	Moderate
The civic engagement	Strong	Strong	Very strong
Structured learning	Strong	Strong	Moderate
Stakeholder interaction	Strong	Strong	Very strong
Practical applicability	Strong	Very strong	Strong
Student autonomy	Moderate	Strong	Moderate
Community orientation	Strong	Strong	Very strong
Experiential learning	Strong	Very strong	Strong

Source: *Author's table*

The comparative analysis in Table 5 shows that the three practices cover the key dimensions of service-learning to varying degrees. "Internship with a cause" demonstrates the highest degree of integration between academic training, substitute oriented activity and continuous civic engagement, which brings it closest to the classic service-learning model. Pro bono workshopsalso contain clear elements of reciprocity, problem-solving and stakeholder collaboration, while Expo with Cause functions more like a gateway model for initial civic engagement and interaction with NGOs. The analysis shows that combining different formats allows building a more flexible and multidimensional ecosystem-based service-learning framework within public administration

training.

The analysis of the examined practices demonstrates that the university's third mission can be implemented through diverse but complementary forms of engagement. While each initiative emphasizes different aspects of civic participation, practice-oriented learning and stakeholder collaboration, all three practices strengthen the connection between the university and society and contribute to the creation of public and social value. On a broader conceptual level, the practices under consideration can be interpreted as different operationalization mechanisms of the university's third mission. Although each initiative places a different emphasis on civic engagement, stakeholder collaboration, and societal impact, they all create thought-oriented forms of university-society interaction.

Table 6. Operationalization of the third mission across the three practices

Third mission element	Pro bono workshops	"Internship with a cause"	"Expo with a cause"
Knowledge transfer	✔	✔	✔
The civic engagement	✔	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔
Stakeholder collaboration	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔
Community impact	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔
Student participation	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔
Experiential learning	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔
Service-learning orientation	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔
Social innovation potential	✔ ✔	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔
Public value creation	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔
Institutional partnership building	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔	✔
Civic awareness development	✔	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔
University societal engagement	✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔	✔ ✔ ✔

Source: *Author's table*

The matrix (Table 6) shows that the three practices operationalize different dimensions of the third mission through a combination of service-learning, experiential learning and stakeholder collaboration. Pro bono workshopsplace greater emphasis on knowledge transfer and collaborative problem-solving, while "Internship with a cause" creates the conditions for a deeper sense of oriented civic engagement and community impact through continued involvement in organisational processes. "Expo with a cause" in turn demonstrates the highest potential for developing civic awareness, student participation and stakeholder networking. The analysis shows that the combination of different formats allows building a more complex and sustainable model for the implementation of the third mission of the university in the context of public administration and civil society.

It should also be mentioned that the present study has some limitations related to the qualitative nature of the analysis and the focus on a limited number of community-oriented learning initiatives in the Bulgarian context. The study does not use quantitative measurements of competence development or long-term tracking of effects on students and organizations. However, the analysis provides valuable conceptual and practical insights into the potential of university-NGO collaboration as a mechanism for operationalization of the university's third mission.

Conclusion

The contemporary transformation of higher education institutions increasingly positions universities as active societal actors that contribute to civic participation, community development, and the creation of public value. Within this context, the third mission of universities expands beyond traditional teaching and research functions and includes sustainable interaction with external stakeholders, civic society organisations and local communities. The present study explored how university-NGO collaboration can function as a mechanism for operationalizing the third mission through civic-oriented educational practices in public administration education.

The analysis of the three practices: Pro bono workshops, "Internship with a cause" and "Expo with a cause", demonstrates that different forms of collaboration between universities and NGOs can generate significant educational, organisational and societal outcomes. Despite the initiatives differ in duration, structure and intensity of interaction, all three practices combine experiential learning, civic engagement and stakeholder collaboration within a community-oriented educational environment.

The findings show that these practices contribute to the development of a broad range of competences among students, including communication skills, stakeholder interaction, teamwork, project management, civic responsibility, empathy and community-oriented learning. At the same time, the initiatives support NGOs through access to prospective students, new ideas, communication support and opportunities for long-term partnership building.

An important conclusion emerging from the study is that service-learning and experiential learning approaches can potentially enrich public administration education by connecting academic knowledge with real social processes and community needs. The practices consistently in the paper demonstrate that students become more aware when learning is linked to authentic societal challenges and direct interaction with civic organizations. In this sense, the initiatives function not only as educational formats but also as mechanisms for strengthening civic awareness, public value orientation and social responsibility.

The study also highlights the importance of ecosystem-based approaches in the implementation of the university third mission. The interaction between universities, NGOs, students, mentors and community organizations creates collaborative environments for co-creation, socially achieved innovation and knowledge exchange. Such models contribute to the transformation of universities into more open, participatory and socially responsive institutions.

Despite the positive outcomes, the analysis also reveals several challenges related to sustainability, institutional capacity, long-term partnership management and the integration of civic-oriented practices into formal curricula. These findings indicate the need for stronger institutional support, more coherent frameworks for university-NGO collaboration and greater recognition of civic engagement activities within higher education systems.

Based on the findings of the study and consideration of the three practices, several strategic recommendations can be chosen regarding the integration of university-NGO collaboration and civic-oriented educational models in higher education:

- institutionalisation of service-learning and civic engagement practices within public administration curricula;
- development of sustainable partnership frameworks between universities, NGOs and public institutions;
- creation of university-based civic engagement networks that facilitate student participation in socially significant initiatives;

- integration of experiential and community-oriented learning approaches into internship and practical training models;
- support for NGOs through collaboration with students and academic staff in areas such as communication, project development and stakeholder engagement;
- development of hybrid and digital formats for civic-oriented educational activities in order to expand accessibility and participation opportunities;
- strengthening the role of universities as facilitators of co-creation, public value generation and socially engaged innovation.

Overall, the findings suggest that combining different forms of service-learning, stakeholder collaboration and experiential learning can contribute to the development of more socially responsive public administration education and to the operationalization of the university third mission through sustainable engagement with civil society.

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