

Puzzling Over Community Service and Reflection

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This past summer, our research team at Boston University analyzed interview data from two different studies involving college students and community service. While the two studies are not linked in any way, we became interested in determining why there was a disparity in how two groups of college students reacted to opportunities for reflection on their service.

The first study involved the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, a student-run homeless shelter in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The work of nearly 100 college-aged volunteers keeps the shelter open seven nights a week from November through April. These volunteers sign up for a weekly dinner, overnight, or breakfast shift and then commit to working that shift for an entire winter. While specific responsibilities of these shifts vary, generally a shift at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter involves preparing a meal, serving the meal, cleaning up afterwards, doing the shelter's laundry, and interacting with 30 homeless men and women staying at the shelter that evening. In seeking to understand the impact of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter upon the college students volunteering there, we conducted interviews at the beginning and end of the winter 2008-2009 with 23 college students volunteering at the shelter.

The second study involved the SERVE program at a large Northeastern university. SERVE combines a year-long community service project with studies in philosophy and theology. For participating students, the experience is an intensive one: 10 hours of weekly community service, two lectures a week, a weekly discussion section, and substantial reading and writing assignments. Yet nearly 400 college students each year elect to participate in SERVE. These participating college students choose a community service project from a menu of nearly 50 opportunities that include tutoring urban elementary school students, volunteering for a suicide hotline, working in a hospital emergency room, helping low-income families apply for affordable housing, and tutoring prison inmates working toward their GEDs. In addition to surveying all 400 students at the beginning and end of this past academic year, we also conducted qualitative interviews with 30 of these participating students.

Clearly, there are a number of factors that differentiate the experiences of the college students volunteering at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter and the college students participating in SERVE. One might say that the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter volunteers are engaging in a community service experience while the college students participating in SERVE are engaging in a service-learning experience. According to Jane David (2009), service-learning "aims to link community service with the school curriculum to enhance both character development and academic skills" (p. 83). In short, the SERVE program has deliberately

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combined community service with academic inquiry in philosophy and theology with the goal of deepening learning in both endeavors. In contrast, the volunteers at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter have no formal academic component that connects to their volunteer experience. While a number of college students volunteering at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter have chosen to enroll in courses at their respective universities that connect in some way to issues of poverty or homelessness, the professors of these classes are by no means striving to connect their academic content to experiences these students are having at the Harvard Square Shelter.

Despite characterizing one of these experiences as community service and the other as community service-*learning*, volunteers at both the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter and participants in the SERVE program have opportunities for reflection.

Specifically, for the past several years, Cambridge's University Lutheran Church—which hosts the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter in its basement—has hired a graduate student from the Harvard Divinity School to guide the undergraduates volunteering at the Harvard Square Shelter in a series of organized reflections. This past year a Divinity School student, Wendy Burrell², attended all the shelter's staff meetings, worked a weekly overnight shift, and hosted seven or eight reflection events a semester. As Burrell described it, her goal in these reflection sessions was to push the college students operating the Harvard Square Shelter to “start intensely asking these deeper questions of ‘Why does the shelter need to exist? How could we put ourselves out of business? How could we connect these experiences that volunteers are having to larger social questions?’”

The SERVE program, for its part, builds opportunities for reflection into its weekly discussion section. While different professors in the SERVE program utilize the weekly discussion section in different ways, most utilize the time to engage students in conversation about successes, challenges, questions, and confusions they are experiencing at their weekly community service sites. Some professors conduct these sessions by asking each student to make a presentation about his or her service site and then take questions from the class; other professors ask students to make explicit connections between their community service experiences and their readings in philosophy and theology; still other professors favor a more free-form model in which participating students simply share what is on their minds about service and social justice.

These opportunities for reflection seem to be a good thing. A number of scholars who focus on the effects of service and service-learning have described the importance of providing students a context for their service through reflection and academic content (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2008; Seider, 2007). Giles and Eyler (1994) noted that reflection allows students to draw connections between their service and learning experiences. Connors and Seifer (2005) have written:

The process of reflection is a core component of service-learning. Service-learning practitioners and researchers alike have concluded that the most effective service-learning experiences are those that provide “structured opportunities” for learners to critically reflect upon their service experience. Structured opportunities for reflection can enable learners to examine and form their beliefs, values, opinions, assumptions, judgments and practices related to an action or experience, gain a deeper understanding of them and construct their own meaning and significance for future actions. (p. 1)

In short, there would seem to be a clear consensus that reflection is an important feature that enhances a student's experience performing community service. However, in looking over the interview transcripts of the volunteers from the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter and the

² All individuals are referred to by pseudonyms

participants in the SERVE program, what is immediately apparent is their divergent reactions to their opportunities for reflection.

SERVE Participants and Reflection

For the college students participating in the SERVE program, the weekly discussion section was one of the most positive aspects of the program. David Burke explained that,

Discussion section is incredible, I love it. It is a viewpoint into all of the other placements. I wish I could have a discussion or sit in discussion sections with all of the other classes, the other discussion section in my class. That is where the real meat is, the real juice.

Several other students echoed Burke's explanation that he enjoys hearing about what other students are doing in their various community service placements. For example, Namwali Ezedi explained that, "What I have enjoyed the most is the discussion time that we have. We get to hear about everyone else's placements. . . . I sort of like get the whole experience without going to every placement."

Other students described their discussion section as an opportunity to voice frustrations and brainstorm solutions to challenges. For example, Clifford Dawson explained that,

People talk about a lot of frustrations that they have and that they feel like perhaps their [service] placements aren't very effective at doing what they aim to do. And so I guess just [we have] general discussion about which placements are the most effective and how come.

Likewise, Mark Lee added that, "I struggle with that issue [of] "Am I really making a difference?" And I realized that 8 other people in my discussion are experiencing the same exact thing." Claudia Evans noted that her discussion section

was a place where you could go and talk about problems in your placements or felt uncomfortable or strange things that happened. We would all talk about it and try and fix our problems. It is definitely something I think is essential to the SERVE program.

Evans went on to describe another student in her discussion section who had broken down into sobs one day over her frustration at the poverty she witnessed at her service placement and her uncertainty about how to make a positive difference in the lives of the men and women with whom she was working. As Evans explained:

We all just came to the conclusion that we can't look at it the way it is and say this is the way it is supposed to be because if everyone else in the world looked at every situation the same, we wouldn't be here right now. The civil rights movement wouldn't have happened if we had said "Oh this is the way it is. It's not going to change." Keep working towards it, wanting to see results. Working towards it and knowing that eventually something will come of it.

In a different discussion section, Natasha Ingram described herself and her classmates as filling a similar role for one another. As she explained, "It is good because we can speak to each other's

experiences. Sometimes people get discouraged . . . and I am just like, ‘You are making a difference.’ Because it can be discouraging.”

Finally, a number of students described their discussion sections as a peak opportunity for learning within the SERVE program. For example, Albert Hurwitz explained that, “I think it is a totally necessary part of class. It is the only place where we can really connect the [coursework and service].” Abigail Leng added that,

I think it’s much better than the real class because then you are actually getting into the real issues. You are getting into what is actually going on in your placement and issues are being brought up about violence, about teen pregnancy, about gangs and everything. We are actually going into detail and getting into the subject.

Finally, Sabrina Mitchell explained that, “Having a large class setting is kind of hard for me to speak up in class [rather] than actually having [a] smaller setting What we also do is connect the readings to what we learn at the placement and what we learn in the readings.” For Mitchell, the discussion section represents a much more comfortable venue to ask questions, clear up misconceptions, and share her thoughts.

Harvard Square Shelter Volunteers and Reflection

Somewhat surprisingly, the college students volunteering at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter were significantly less enthusiastic about opportunities for reflection about their volunteer work. As noted above, a graduate student from the Harvard Divinity School led a number of reflection sessions for shelter volunteers. While all of the shelter volunteers expressed appreciation for the divinity student as a person and for her commitment to the shelter, they were less positive about the reflection experience itself. Nathan Small explained that,

There were some [reflection sessions] especially at the beginning of the year that I thought went really well. I think there are other times when some people are sort of like, ‘I don’t know whether I want to talk about this right now.’ Or ‘I don’t know whether I really want to talk about this at all.’

Small added that, for the larger reflection events, “I think that the attendance has been pretty poor. It’s tough. People are busy” Likewise, Larry Yoon said of the reflection sessions, “They are useful when I attend them, [but] I haven’t gone to a lot of them. I feel like attendance isn’t that strong.” Finally, Louis Landau noted that one of the aspects of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter he most appreciated is that the organization “makes an effort to make sure they’re actually having an effect, not doing reflections about their mission statement.”

Of the 23 shelter volunteers who were interviewed as part of this research project, Small, Yoon, and Landau were among the only three who discussed the voluntary reflection sessions. This scarcity of data is due in part to the fact that the reflection sessions were not a primary focus of this study and, thus, were not an explicit part of the interview protocol. Additionally, however, because the reflection sessions sponsored by the University Lutheran Church were not a mandatory component of the volunteer experience, very few of the Harvard Square Shelter volunteers had actually attended one of the reflection sessions. This lack of attendance also accounts for the scarcity of interview data about the impact of the reflection sessions, but simultaneously serves as an indicator of the general lack of interest among shelter volunteers in engaging in these organized reflection activities.

Discussion

We embarked upon these studies of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter and the SERVE Program with the goal of offering scholars and university administrators a better understanding of the factors that do (and do not) contribute to the civic and moral development of American college students. Results from these two studies are currently in the process of being analyzed.

A “side question” that emerged from these two studies, however, was, “Why such disparate reactions to reflection?” Clearly, there are some significant differences between the reflection opportunities offered by the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter and SERVE program. One major difference is the readings in philosophy and theology that are a part of the SERVE program. Through these readings, the students participating in SERVE are being exposed to the ways in which two ancient fields have gone about contemplating the “big questions” that are raised by meaningful community service experiences. And, in the comments above, one can see that SERVE participants like Albert Hurwitz identified their discussion sections as an opportunity to draw connections between their service placements and their readings in philosophy and theology. The impact of these readings in philosophy and theology will be considered in detail in future writings.

Interestingly, however, a number of SERVE participants seemed to express a preference for the discussion section over lecture because, in these discussion sections, they could focus exclusively on their experiences in their service placements *without* bringing in the philosophy or theology. For example, recall that Abigail Leng declared her discussion section “much better than the real class because you are actually getting into the real issues.” Likewise, David Burke characterized his discussion section as “where the real meat is.” Implicit in both of these students’ comments was an inclination to talk directly and specifically about their service experiences and the issues they witnessed there without relying as heavily on their newly-developing background in philosophy or theology. It would seem, then, that while the exposure to philosophy and theology was an important aid to reflection for many SERVE participants, another portion of these participants appreciated their discussion sections as a respite from the philosophy and theology.

A second major difference between these two volunteer experiences is variety. The students participating in SERVE are coming together to reflect on their experiences in a variety of different service placements while all of the Harvard Square Shelter volunteers are coming together from the same service site. The comments of a number of SERVE participants make it clear that they enjoy the opportunity to learn about the varied service experiences of their peers; however, this difference does not seem to lie at the heart of the divergent reactions to reflection. We make this observation because, once a month, the SERVE participants who volunteer at the *same service placement* meet to reflect upon their successes, challenges, questions, and confusions at their particular service placement. These reflection sessions, which are led by an older student, seem to be even more popular with SERVE participants than their weekly discussion sections. For example, Danny Green, whose service placement is at a suicide hotline sponsored by the Samaritans, explained that, “The Samaritans group discussions are a lot more valuable than the in-class discussions.” Here, Green suggests that the reflection sessions with the Samaritans volunteers are more useful to him than the weekly discussion sections. Abigail Leng seconded this perspective with the explanation that the other college students at her tutoring placement “all are coming from the same situation. . . . We can all relate. It’s nice to have that.” It would seem, then, that the differing perspectives on reflection offered by Harvard Square Shelter volunteers and SERVE participants cannot be attributed primarily to variety.

Another difference lies in motivation. For the volunteers at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, the volunteer experience was an entirely extracurricular one while the college students participating in the SERVE program received academic credit for their participation. Perhaps this difference led the Harvard Square Shelter volunteers to regard their commitment as limited to the actual volunteer work itself while the SERVE students began their SERVE experience with an expectation for participation in reflection activities already built in. Alternatively, perhaps the purely extracurricular nature of the volunteer work at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter meant that the shelter's volunteers knew precisely what they were getting into when they elected to volunteer and, as a result, encountered fewer surprising or frustrating experiences in need of processing. On the other hand, the SERVE participants— particularly those students who regarded SERVE primarily as an opportunity to meet university course requirements— may have encountered issues of injustice and inequity through their service placements that genuinely caught them by surprise. Perhaps these unexpected encounters with inequity made SERVE students more amenable to opportunities for reflection. A fourth possibility is that the opportunity to meet *every week* with the same group of classmates led the SERVE participants to build up a sense of camaraderie that was not possible in the optional reflection sessions offered by the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter.

Certainly this question of what types of reflection appeal to college students is worthy of further research, particularly in light of the existing scholarship on the importance of reflection in deepening the learning that accompanies participation in community service. One possible explanation, though, for these divergent reactions to reflection has to do with the formality with which these reflection opportunities were presented. For the Harvard Square Shelter volunteers, the reflection sessions led by the Harvard Divinity student were framed as optional. They were scheduled for a particular evening, a theme was chosen, and interested volunteers were invited to participate (and enticed by the promise of pizza). For the college students participating in SERVE, on the other hand, their weekly discussion sections and monthly same-site reflection sessions were required expectations already set in stone when they signed up to participate in SERVE. The discussion sections were led by a SERVE faculty member (a professor of theology or philosophy), and the same-site reflection sessions were led by older students who had participated in SERVE earlier in their academic careers and had chosen to maintain their affiliation with the program by joining the SERVE Council. In short, there was an air of formality that surrounded SERVE's reflection opportunities, and, as a result, students seemed to take them seriously.

Recall from earlier in this article the description by Claudia Evans of the student in her discussion section who had broken down into tears while describing some of the challenges associated with her service placement. Another interviewed student, Matthew Muldoon, described the same incident with the following explanation: "I thought it was really neat how this girl started crying in front of us. It was sad. I felt bad she had this experience, but it was neat because it was like, this is real." Many of the college students who elected to participate in community service through both the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter and the SERVE program did so out of a desire to do work that felt meaningful and real. Others explicitly expressed their hope that community service would help them to break out of the "bubble" of their respective college campuses and to get out into the "real world." These young adults—on the border between adolescence and emerging adulthood— are very much in search of "real" experience that can inform their understanding of the world and their role in it. It seems possible that the formality of the SERVE program's opportunities for reflection lent these opportunities an air of authenticity that students appreciated while the optional, more *laissez-faire* nature of the reflection sessions sponsored by the Harvard Square Shelter resulted in poor attendance and criticism. It would be interesting to see what would happen if the Harvard Square Shelter made

these reflection sessions a mandatory component of the volunteer experience. Clearly, attendance at these reflection sessions would improve, but would students simultaneously characterize them more positively? One clue about students' appreciation for formality can be found in the number of interviewed volunteers from the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter who expressed appreciation for the opportunity, through this research study, to reflect upon the experience of volunteering at the Harvard Square Shelter. Perhaps the formality of a research study— in which students sat down one-on-one with a university professor and participated in an audio-recorded interview— struck them as more “real” than the organized reflection sessions about which they were critical. Certainly these conclusions are speculative, but there would seem to be great value in investigating more deeply the *types* of reflection to which university students do and do not respond favorably.

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