

Tiers of Understanding at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter

Scott Seider, Contributing Editor, Boston University¹

In this special Back-to-School Issue of the *Journal of College and Character*, the editors introduce a new continuing column entitled “Civic Engagement on Campus.” Scott Seider is an assistant professor of education at Boston University whose research focuses on the sociopolitical development of adolescents and emerging adults. He is currently completing a book about the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter—a homeless shelter in Cambridge, Massachusetts, run entirely by university students. Some initial findings from this research project are offered in this column.

Over the past decade, community service has become a staple on most college campuses. According to UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, 65% of college students described their respective institutions as offering opportunities to participate in community service (Liu, Ruiz, DeAngelo, & Pryor, 2009). Likewise, in responses to the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation survey, 43% of the nation’s college students reported participating in some form of community service in the past year. However, a much smaller number of college students—approximately 19%—reported volunteering on a regular basis (CIRCLE, 2009).

An important, but difficult, question to consider when it comes to community service is “How much is the right amount?” In other words, if a university creates opportunities for community service for students with the goal of deepening their understanding of the world, strengthening their commitment to social action, and increasing the likelihood that they will become engaged and active citizens, how *much* service is necessary to achieve this goal? A few hours every semester? One day a month? A weekly community service obligation? The answer to this question is highly contextual; however, in an important study of the impact of community service upon civic engagement using the National Educational Longitudinal Survey data-set, Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins (2007) found that “frequency of participation was not a statistically significant predictor” (p.207). In other words, while these researchers found participation in community service opportunities during the teenage years to be an important predictor of civic engagement in adulthood, the frequency with which youth participated in this service was not significant. From these findings, Hart et al. concluded of the teenagers in their analysis:

The amount of service performed mattered little for whether they [teenagers] matured into young adults who participated in local elections. Instead, it appears that community service participation of any sort and of any frequency in high school increased voting in early adulthood. (p. 207)

According to these scholars’ findings, universities interested in graduating an active citizenry are well-served to encourage high participation rates in campus community service

¹ Scott Seider is an assistant professor of education at Boston University. His work has been published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research*, the *Journal of Moral Education*, and *Educational Leadership*.

opportunities but can focus less on the regularity with which individual students visit a particular service site or the type of service itself.

Analyses of large data-sets, especially by esteemed scholars like Daniel Hart and his colleagues, have an enormous amount to offer our understanding of the development of young people into engaged, socially conscious adults. What smaller-scale, qualitative research can do, however, is flesh out the details. Over the past year, I have been researching and writing about the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, an entirely student-run homeless shelter in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This homeless shelter has been in operation for more than twenty-five years now in the basement of a local church and, each year, relies on approximately 100 college-aged volunteers from Harvard, Tufts, Wellesley, and Boston University to keep the shelter open seven nights a week from November through April—the five coldest months of the year in Boston—and, in so doing, provide shelter to 30 men and women each night contending with homelessness. This small basement shelter stands as an impressive example of what youthful energy and social and moral idealism can accomplish.

While all of the college students involved with the shelter are volunteers, there are two different types of volunteers. The first type of volunteer signs up for a weekly dinner, overnight, or breakfast shift, and is expected to work that particular shift—for example, the Tuesday breakfast shift—from November through April. Of these three shifts, the breakfast shift is the smallest time commitment—just two hours a week, albeit from 6:30-8:30 in the morning, while the overnight shift constitutes an eight hour a week time commitment from 11 PM to 6:30 AM. Over the course of the entire winter, the shelter's weekly volunteers can expect to contribute between 40 and 120 hours to the shelter.

The Harvard Square Shelter's second type of volunteer is the students who serve as the shelter's "staff." Though still volunteers, these are the students responsible for the leadership and management of the shelter. Two staff members are in charge of each dinner, overnight, and breakfast shift. Staff members also meet once a week as a group to discuss challenges that have arisen over the course of the week and any shelter policies that need to be adjusted, abandoned, or adopted. Finally, each staff member has a particular set of responsibilities for keeping the shelter operating. There is a volunteer director who ensures that there are a sufficient number of volunteers for each dinner, overnight, and breakfast shift; a supplies director responsible for keeping the shelter fully stocked; an administrative director who communicates with the leadership of the church in which the shelter is located; and resource advocacy staff members who are in charge of the table in the shelter each night to assist the shelter's homeless guests in connecting to government resources to which they may be entitled. When all of these different responsibilities are added up, the "staff members" of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter are spending approximately 15-20 hours a week on shelter-related business, which comes out to somewhere in the realm of 300 hours over the course of the winter.

In the course of this research project, I have had the opportunity to conduct qualitative interviews with both types of student-volunteers at the beginning of the winter in November and then again at the end of the winter in early April. One of the aspects of these interviews that caught my attention is that these two types of volunteers—the shelter's weekly volunteers vs. the shelter's staff members— seem to be taking different lessons away from the experience. While there are individual exceptions for the weekly volunteers, the experience of spending a few hours each week at the shelter serves to put a face on the issue of homelessness. For the shelter's staff members, on the other hand, their deeper involvement in the shelter in terms of both time and responsibility has allowed them a vantage point to witness the complex interplay between homelessness and a number of other social issues.

The Weekly Volunteers

Consider the descriptions from this past April of several of the shelter's weekly volunteers about what they believe they gained from their volunteer experience. College senior Hope Franklin² explained that, "You would see the [shelter's homeless] guests on the street, and you would not know that they are homeless. I know in my mind that's the case, that homelessness does not look one way or the other, but that was reinforced." Freshman Nancy Mellor explained:

I guess in my head, a homeless person meant someone that's been living on the streets for years. Most of the guests we have [at the shelter], they are just. . . . We have a guest that graduated from Boston College and one that graduated from Harvard a while ago. They had jobs, they hit a rough patch, and now they are homeless. But they are looking for more. Just hearing the stories I guess is the most surprising part. A lot of them have kids and families.

Here, Mellor expresses her surprise that many of the homeless men and women she has encountered through her volunteer work have educations, a work history, and families.

Another volunteer, sophomore Charlotte Wu, explained:

If I hadn't worked in the shelter and I was just wandering around, I wouldn't have known they were guests at a homeless shelter. Which really struck me because it just made me a lot more aware about anywhere that I go, that you can't really tell them apart. There's no nametag on their forehead that says: 'I go to a homeless shelter every night.'

In the comments of all of these students, then, one can hear the growing realization that there is little distinction between men and women contending with homelessness and the other fellow citizens they encounter every day of the week. Homelessness is neither a disease nor a condition, but just a description of a particular individual's housing situation. As Philip Mangano, past director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, has noted of the volunteer experience at the Harvard Square Shelter: "I think an important part of that volunteerism is breaking down some of the myths and stereotypes about homeless people and disadvantaged people, who they are, what their aspirations are. That's a very important understanding."

And, of course, it is equally important for these volunteers to understand that—ordinary human beings—the homeless men and women they encounter are no more saints than they are sinners. They have bad days, bad moods, and moments of ingratitude in the same way that everyone else does. Melissa Sanguinetti, one of the shelter's "staff members," is now a junior in college and has been working at the shelter for several years. In that time, she has had the opportunity to observe the impact of the shelter experience upon numerous weekly volunteers. According to Sanguinetti:

They would come in, wouldn't know what to expect. They had some preconceived ideas, but were kind of a blank sheet. Then they would have a really good conversation with a guest, maybe they would eat dinner with them, maybe a guest would open up to them, and it would just blow their minds. And they'd be like, Wow I love homeless people. This is great. What a Kodak moment that was! And they run and tell all their friends that they had this really cool bonding experience and kind of romanticize it, and then something happens, like a bad incident, or something, and then all of a sudden you're just

² All names of students in this article are pseudonyms

like thrown this left hook and like oh, maybe it wasn't as simple as I thought. Maybe people do have deeper issues. Maybe this isn't the safe, happy place I thought it was. And so they swing the other way. And then by the end of the semester, they're like, 'Oh I get it. People aren't perfect, and they aren't horrible. They're human, they have good days, bad days, just like us, and you can't expect them to be perfectly happy and smiling all the time, and you can't expect them, or you hope they're not, angry and demanding and violent either. But there's like this happy medium that makes them just like everybody else, and no longer do you glamorize it, and no longer do you have these really negative stereotypes. You just recognize that they're like normal people that have had a different set of situations.

From Sanguinetti's perspective, the volunteer experience over the course of a single winter is akin to a pendulum in which a volunteer comes in with a set of stereotypes, allows a particularly good conversation to lead to a glamorization of the homeless, and finally the volunteer settles into recognition of the substantial similarities between the homeless and everyone else. Or as junior Lester Pearson explained at the conclusion of his first year of volunteering at the shelter, "I think you sort of see the side of homelessness that's more similar to the sides of your life. Because, before it's kind of this huge divide. Now it seems a little [like] the divide has closed, I guess."

The Shelter "Staff"

A winter of volunteering at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter seemed to "put a face" on homelessness for many of the shelter's weekly volunteers. The college students who served as "staff" members this past year at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, on the other hand, described their takeaways from the experience in different terms. Specifically, these students seemed to come away from their volunteer experience at the shelter with a deeper understanding of the way in which homelessness interacted in complex ways with a variety of other social problems. Take for example, junior Nathan Small, who has been volunteering at the shelter since he was a high school student at a local high school. According to Small, "I've been here for six years. And a lot of the people I see here [at the shelter] are people I've seen here for six years. Six years is a long time." Small's frustration is evident in these words, but his takeaway from witnessing the shelter's many long-term homeless guests is the following:

I think that we do need changes in the way we think about homelessness, the way we attack homelessness in this country, but if we're serious about eliminating the root of the problem, it's going to come through education reform and healthcare reform.

Here, Small reveals his recognition that the issue of homelessness is deeply connected to issues of education and healthcare.

Another student, Liam Murphy, described his realization of the ways in which social security payments can unintentionally incentivize homelessness. Specifically, Murphy—who works with the shelter's resource advocacy program to connect the shelter's guests to resources for which they qualify—discovered that a homeless man who is receiving \$700 a month in social security disability insurance is in a tricky situation because while that \$700 is not enough to afford an apartment, an individual receiving disability payments will lose those payments if he or she obtains employment. As Murphy noted, "It's a Catch-22." With the disability payments, an individual could only afford an apartment by going out and getting a job, but getting a job would mean losing the disability payments. Likewise, a second way an individual receiving disability payments can lose his or her monthly checks is by accumulating more than \$2,000 in savings. As

Murphy explained, “It’s just kind of hard to see that kind of situation where the guest is perpetually stuck and can’t get out of it.” Murphy, who plans to go to medical school and pursue a career in medicine, described one of his takeaways from witnessing this Catch-22:

It shows me what really needs to happen is that the people who have the more individualized focus—for example, in my case, like when a doctor goes in everyday and treats patients— need to try to inject their ideas and their opinions more on a policy level because, if not, you have the system as it is now, and it just doesn’t work.

Here, Murphy expresses his belief that having witnessed firsthand some of the loopholes in the social security disability system, he will have a responsibility as a physician to play a role in fixing these loopholes.

The experiences of Small, Murphy, and several other Harvard Square Shelter “staff” members reveal ways in which their deeper involvement with the shelter led them to come away from their volunteer experience with not only a more personal understanding of homelessness, but also a deeper understanding of the larger structural issues that contribute to homelessness. In comparing the takeaways from the volunteer experience of the Harvard Square Shelter’s weekly volunteers vs. its staff members, it is difficult to ascertain whether the additional takeaways described by the shelter’s staff members have come about as a result of the additional *time* they devote to the Harvard Square Shelter or whether it is their vantage points as the shelter’s managers that allow such learning to be possible. The most likely answer is that the two factors—time and responsibility— are inseparable. Because the Harvard Square Shelter’s student-directors and supervisors put so many hours into their work at the shelter, they forge deeper relationships with the shelter’s homeless guests and get a much closer look at the factors that can impede those men and women’s attempts to secure permanent housing. Moreover, the responsibilities that accompany their positions— such as staffing the shelter’s resource advocacy table— offer the shelter’s “staff” members a much more intimate look into the lives of men and women they are working to support. In contrast, it is impossible to take on significant responsibilities within an organization if one is only able to spend two hours a week in service to that organization. It is possible within those two hours to engage in a meaningful conversation and to recognize another individual’s humanity, but the more complex issues that surround a social ill like homelessness can take longer to emerge.

Conclusion

From the experiences of these two types of volunteers at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, it would seem worthwhile to take a second, deeper look at the recent finding with which I began this paper: that the frequency of community service participation has little effect upon participants’ future civic engagement. And it seems likely that the authors of the above-mentioned and important study recognize the importance of such an endeavor as well. In 1996, Jim Youniss, one of the authors of the above-mentioned study (Hart et al, 2007), along with Miranda Yates, authored one of the most important studies in the service-learning literature (Yates & Youniss, 1996). The study examined the impact of a program offered at a parochial school in Washington, DC that combined a course on social justice issues with regular service at a local soup kitchen. In analyzing the essays that participating students completed about the experience, Youniss and Yates divided the participating students’ learning into three tiers. The first tier included the participating teenagers who had come to recognize the falseness of the stereotypes they perceived about the homeless; the second tier included the adolescents who recognized the similarities between their own lives and the homeless men and women they

encountered at the soup kitchen; and the third tier included the participating teens who had begun to consider the underlying causes of homelessness and the steps that might be taken to address these causes. In short, Yates and Youniss might suggest that the Harvard Square Shelter's weekly volunteers fall somewhere inside tiers one and two while many of the shelter's "staff members" are firmly ensconced in tier three. All of the high school students in Youniss and Yates's study had spent similar amounts of *time* volunteering and taken on similar levels of *responsibility*, so of course Youniss and Yates were not focused on these levers in their analyzes of these students' development. Nonetheless, the fact that my current work with the volunteers at the Harvard Square Shelter maps so neatly onto Youniss and Yates's model would suggest that the levels of frequency and responsibility embedded in particular community service opportunities are well worth considering by both researchers and university administrators

References

- Hart, D., Donnelly, T., Youniss, J., & Atkins, R. (2007). High school community service as a predictor of adult voting and volunteering. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44(1), 197-219.
- Liu, A., Ruiz, S., DeAngelo, L., & Pryor, J. (2009). *Findings from the 2008 Administration of the College Senior Survey (CSS): National Aggregates*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.
- Yates, M., & Youniss, J. (1996). Community service and political-moral identity in adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 6(3), 271-284.
- Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (2009). Volunteering/community service. Retrieved July 1, 2009, from http://www.civicyouth.org/?page_id=237
-