Two Key Strategies for Enhancing Community Service Learning

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Abstract

A growing body of research has found community service learning to have a positive effect upon participating college students’ civic development; however, far less scholarship has considered the impact of particular components of a community service learning program. This article presents two preliminary but promising strategies for enhancing the effects of community service learning programming upon participating college students: (a) identifying students’ expectations at the outset of the service experience about what they expect to accomplish and (b) providing students’ parents with opportunities to participate in their children’s reflection about their service experiences.

The Corporation for National & Community Service estimates that more than three million college students participate in community service or community service learning each year. Community service is a term used to refer to any type of volunteer work while community service learning pairs community service with intentional learning goals and opportunities for reflection (Kendall, 1990).

During the 2008–09 school year, I carried out a research study that considered the effects of the Serve community service learning program at Ignatius University upon the civic development of participating college students. The Serve Program was a yearlong, 10-credit experience that combined academic study of philosophy and theology with ten hours of weekly community service at one of approximately 50 different government agencies or nonprofit organizations committed to combating poverty or its effects. These organizations ranged from homeless shelters to community centers for low-income youth to emergency rooms in public hospitals. Approximately 350 Ignatius University students participated in the Serve Program during the 2008–09 academic year, and another 75 students were randomly assigned to the program’s wait list. As a result of this natural experiment, my research team and I were able to utilize pre-post surveys to compare the shifts in attitudes and values of students participating in the Serve Program with their peers on the program’s wait list. We found that, in comparison with their peers on the wait list, participating in Serve had a significant positive effect upon participating students’ public service motivation, expected po-
itical involvement, and beliefs about the causes of poverty (Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2012; Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2011a, 2011b).

Perhaps of even greater interest to university faculty and administrators leading programs in community engagement, however, were our findings about the different learning experiences of students within the Serve Program. Namely, our analyses revealed significant differences between students participating in youth-based service placements and adult-based service placements (Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2012) and between students whose parents supported their participation in the Serve Program and those who did not (Seider, 2012). Below, we draw upon these findings as well as qualitative interviews with Serve participants to offer two key recommendations to university faculty and administrators for enhancing their own community service learning programming.

**Different Placements, Different Effects**

Campus Compact (2009) reports that the three types of community service learning in which college students are most likely to engage are (a) tutoring K-12 youth, (b) volunteering in a soup kitchen, and (c) promoting sustainability and environmentalism. These three types of service activities have little in common, and yet there has been relatively little research comparing the effects of different types of community service learning experiences upon participating students. Several studies have found that community service learning (CSL) experiences that involve more than twenty hours of service have a greater impact upon participating students’ awareness of social issues than shorter-term CSL experiences (Hepburn, Niemi, & Chapman, 2000; Kendrick, 1996). Other scholars have found that CSL experiences bringing students into direct contact with the recipients of the service have a greater impact upon students’ civic attitudes than CSL programs involving more indirect forms of service (Kohls, 1996; Mabry, 1998). Yet, there is still much to be learned about the effects of different types of service upon participating college students.

Of the 350 Ignatius University students participating in the Serve Program, approximately half chose service placements involving adults (e.g., homeless shelters, soup kitchens, prison tutoring) and half chose service placements involving youth (e.g., after-school tutoring programs for low-income youth, working as a teacher’s aide at an urban school for children with emotional and behavioral disabilities). There were no significant differences in age, gender, religion, or race/ethnicity between the students who chose these two different types of placements, nor were there any significant attitudinal differences between these two groups of students at the start of the school year or in their academic experiences within the Serve Program. However, when we compared the pre-post surveys of these two sets of students, we found that the students participating in the adult-based placements showed significantly larger increases over the course of the year in their public service motivation and declines in their belief in a just world than their peers engaged in youth-based service placements. In other words, the Serve participants volunteering at homeless shelters, hospital emergency rooms, and prisons finished the academic year with greater interest in participating in community service going forward and greater skepticism that the world is a just place for everyone than their peers who had been volunteering in after-school tutoring programs and urban community centers.

There are a number of possible explanations for these differential effects of youth-based and adult-based placements. For example, one possibility is that homeless shelters and soup kitchens offer college students a more powerful lens on the effects of poverty (and, thus, the need for community service) than after-school programs and community centers. Another possibility is that, because Serve participants chose
their service placements, there may be a difference between these two groups of students (that we could not detect) that impacted how they experienced the program. Our qualitative interviews with college students participating in the Serve Program, however, suggest a different answer. Namely, these interviews revealed a sizable difference in the expectations with which Serve participants began their service-work at youth-based placements versus adult-based placements.

The majority of the students engaged in the youth-based placements entered into their service experiences with extremely high expectations about what they would accomplish at these placements and, perhaps as a result, characterized themselves at the conclusion of their service experiences as frustrated and disappointed. For example, one student, Felicia, was representative of many of her peers when she explained her work tutoring a middle school student:

I went in with expectations that I am going to change their perspective on education. I am going to make them want to read. I am going to make them as I was as a student, and [then] you realize that is not going to happen.

In contrast, the majority of the students volunteering at adult-based placements admitted that their lack of experience at homeless shelters, soup kitchens, incarceration facilities, etc., meant that they entered into these placements with few expectations at all about what they would accomplish at these placements. As a result, even though the actual service-work at these adult-based placements was often far less tangible than at the youth-based placements, the college students participating at the adult-based placements completed their service experiences more satisfied with their accomplishments. For example, one student, Annie, is representative of her peers at the adult-based placements when she described her role at a rehabilitation center for low-income adults: “My job is just to talk to the clients, chill with them. I cook with them. I am there to listen. I am there to learn. I am there to make them feel comfortable.”

The disparate experiences of Serve participants at the youth- and adult-based placements seems to underscore research by Barry Schwartz (2004) that has found high expectations can be counterproductive because individuals are likely to grow frustrated or discouraged when the actual experience does not live up to those high expectations. We believe it would be incorrect to conclude from these findings, however, that college students are better served engaging in service involving adults than youth. Rather, while there has been a significant body of scholarship focused on the importance of guiding students in reflection after powerful service experiences, this research study points to the importance of engaging college students in discussion of their expectations at the outset of their service experiences. We want college students engaged in community service learning to enter into these experiences not only with energy, optimism, and ambition, but also awareness of the fact that meaningful service experiences typically entail challenge and struggle. In raising the possibility of such struggle at the outset, university faculty and administrators leading community service learning programming can temper the unproductive frustration and discouragement their students may experience when their community service learning does not go precisely according to plan.

**Parental Support Shapes the Service Experience**

A second strategy for enhancing the community service learning experiences of university students involves their parents. Particularly, faculty and administrators leading CSL programming at four-year residential universities can easily overlook the role of parents and other close relatives in influencing the learning
experiences of college students engaged in community service learning. However, a number of different researchers have found that young adults’ engagement in and commitment to community service are often directly linked to the “presence of a supportive family or social network” (Damon, 2008; Pancer & Pratt, 1999, p. 49; Schervish, 1995). Our own study of the Serve Program underscored this prior research. Namely, we found a significant relationship between participating students’ increases in public service motivation and expected political participation and their parents’ supportiveness of their participation in the Serve Program. In other words, the students who characterized their parents as highly supportive of their participation in the Serve Program were also the students who, on average, demonstrated the greatest increases in their commitment to engaging in future community service, as well as civic behaviors such as voting in local and national elections and campaigning for a political candidate or cause.

Our interest in considering the effects of parent support came about as a result of qualitative interviews in which a number of students described their parents as offering very different responses to their participation in the Serve Program. On one end of the spectrum, Marisa explained that “My dad and I had this very intense conversation when I was home over winter break, and he was just really impressed with what we were doing, which was really cool.” On the other hand, Cecelia described a very different response from her father:

When I told him over Thanksgiving break that I was doing it (Serve), he was livid…. I think he has a skewed perspective of homeless people. He has always told me never go near them. We got into a yelling match in the car on Thanksgiving. He was like, “How dare they charge $50,000 for you to go to school there?” So I don’t usually talk that much [about Serve] either to friends or family at home.

These disparate responses from parents offer a possible explanation for the significant effect of the Serve Program upon Ignatius University students who characterized their parents as highly supportive of their participation in Serve. Namely, the students with parents enthusiastic about their participation in the Serve Program were able to engage in important conversations with their parents about this work. Such conversations represented powerful opportunities for reflection with the “teachers” who knew these students best and whose opinions likely mattered a great deal to them. In contrast, the students such as Cecelia with parents displeased about their participation in the Serve Program characterized themselves as explicitly avoiding conversations about their learning in the Serve Program. In so doing, these students missed out on opportunities for one-on-one reflection with the individuals perhaps most familiar with their context and existing worldview.

Certainly, it is a tall order to expect university faculty and administrators leading CSL programs to transform the perspective of their students’ unsupportive parents. That said, these findings about the relationship between parental support and students’ civic development do point to a positive step that such faculty and administrators can take to facilitate students’ learning. Specifically, university faculty and administrators would be well served to make available to their students’ parents extensive information about the CSL programming in which their children are participating: the program’s mission statement and learning goals, assigned readings, descriptions of the service placements, and more. By making such information available to parents—perhaps through the program’s website—university faculty and administrators are equipping highly supportive parents with more tools to engage their college-age children in discussion about their CSL experiences. At the same time, the availability of such content also provides resistant or unsupportive parents with the opportunity to better understand the learning goals of the community service learning program in which their children are participating and the particular experiences they will be having.
within the program. While such a move is by no means guaranteed to transform the perspective of resistant parents, it at least offers these parents the opportunity to consider why their children and their children’s university believe a particular community service learning experience to be a valuable one.

**Conclusion**

According to the Higher Education Research Institute, 65 percent of American college freshmen reported that their respective universities offered opportunities to get involved in community service or community service learning (Liu, Ruiz, DeAngelo, & Pryor, 2009). While a growing body of research has found community service learning to have a positive effect upon participating college students’ civic development, far less scholarship has considered the impact of particular components of a community service learning program. With this admittedly preliminary scholarship, I have presented two straightforward strategies for enhancing the effects of CSL programming upon participating college students. In so doing, I seek to provide useful levers to university faculty and administrators dedicated to fostering in their students a commitment to their roles and responsibilities as engaged citizens.

**References**


