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Tracking a Lifelong Service Commitment in Alumni of the College of William and Mary

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ABSTRACT

In order to better understand the development of a commitment to service, this paper explores the lives of alumni of The College of William and Mary as case studies. It is valuable to students and academic institutions alike to track a student's service commitment to see if his or her college experience was able to deepen that commitment. William and Mary is an exemplar in service-learning, which is why its alumni were interviewed and used as case studies. The College of William and Mary has an Office of Civic Engagement (OCE) that has connected students with community partners since 2009 to advance students' service-learning achievements. One of OCE's most popular initiatives, the Sharpe Community Scholars Program, provides a service-learning living environment, classes, and projects to incoming freshmen. According to a campus-wide survey in 2012, 29% of students on campus had volunteered with OCE for the 2011-2012 academic year (Stelljes, 2012). Before OCE was erected, the Office of Student Volunteer Services existed on campus.

These institutions have enhanced student's engagement in community service for decades. According to Wade (1997) as well as Billig (2000), schools with service-learning programs are able to support increased academic and intellectual development, social and personal development, and political efficacy and participation. Individual alumnus's responses to questions regarding their participation in service and service-learning before, after, and during college provide insight into William and Mary's ability to build and inspire a lifelong dedication to community service. Upon sending surveys to a group of 18 William and Mary alumni regarding changes in their service commitment, the overwhelming response was that The College, its programs, and professors significantly developed their commitment to serve. By providing a space to serve, inspiring a dedication to service, and clearly showing the needs of

others, The College of William and Mary has helped to instill a lifelong dedication to service within each of these alumni.

INTRODUCTION

When we think of those committed to volunteering and serving in their communities, we imagine someone selfless, altruistic, and passionate. Community service has shaped the nation that we live in today and has begun to become popular with United States citizens in the international sphere as well. Students at The College of William and Mary seem to be heavily involved in community service, with the College being listed as one of Newsweek and Kaplan's "Most Service-Minded Schools." The College encourages all of its students to volunteer in local communities and offers a variety of service-learning courses that challenge students to intelligently evaluate their own community engagement. But where does the drive to perform this service come from? Does the college learning environment act as a catalyst for students to become more engaged in their communities, or is the drive to perform service inherently embedded within an individual? In order to answer these questions, William and Mary alumni who are currently maintaining commitments to service must be employed to provide information about the history of their individual service commitments.

METHOD

In order to track determinants of an individual's participation in community service, 18 William and Mary alumni who still identified as "dedicated to service" were interviewed in a qualitative study questioning their overall involvement in community service. The alumni's graduation years spanned approximately 30 years, with the earliest year being 1982 and the latest being 2011. The interview consisted of 16 questions calling for the interviewee to openly evaluate their past and present commitments to service, personal values, leadership styles, and

their time at The College of William and Mary. There were no multiple choice answers available to choose from, so each response was up to the discretion of the interviewee; he or she could also choose not to answer any question. Approximately 77% stated that their current dedication to community service lies within their vocation, while the rest of the interviewees said that they currently volunteer with local service committees.

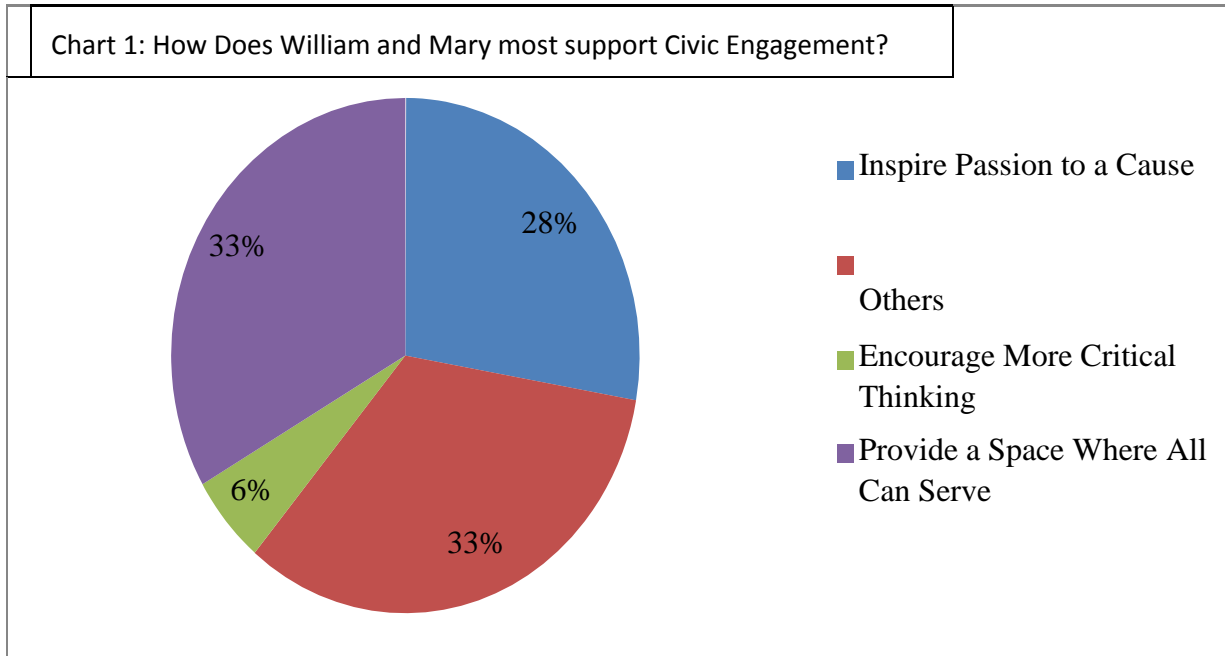
FINDINGS

In order to gain a better understanding of the alumni's dedication to service, the first set of questions dealt with their upbringing. Surprisingly 53% of alums classified themselves as being raised in a small, rural town instead of in a suburban or urban neighborhood. This is understandable because there is said to be a greater level of achievement in rural schools compared to urban primary and secondary schools. Specifically, the graduation rates and rates of students seeking higher education are said to be higher outside of urban areas. According to The Urban Institute Education Policy Center the combined graduation rates from all high schools in the entire District of Columbia in 2000 was 53.4%, while the combined graduation rate throughout the rural state of North Dakota was 84.9% (Swanson, 2003). These statistics are also due to a lesser amount of affluence in inner-city schools and neighborhoods. The interviewees being college alumni, it is likely that they attended fully accredited primary and secondary schools that were better equipped to nurture their development. Most of the interviewees were also raised alongside siblings. Approximately 83% of the responses said that they came from a family of four or more with attentive parents who were dedicated to raising their children.

Another resounding response was that 93% of interviewees said that they had attended public schools throughout their lives. This response was rather interesting, and alludes to the idea that most of the interviewees were not of a social or economic class that desired private

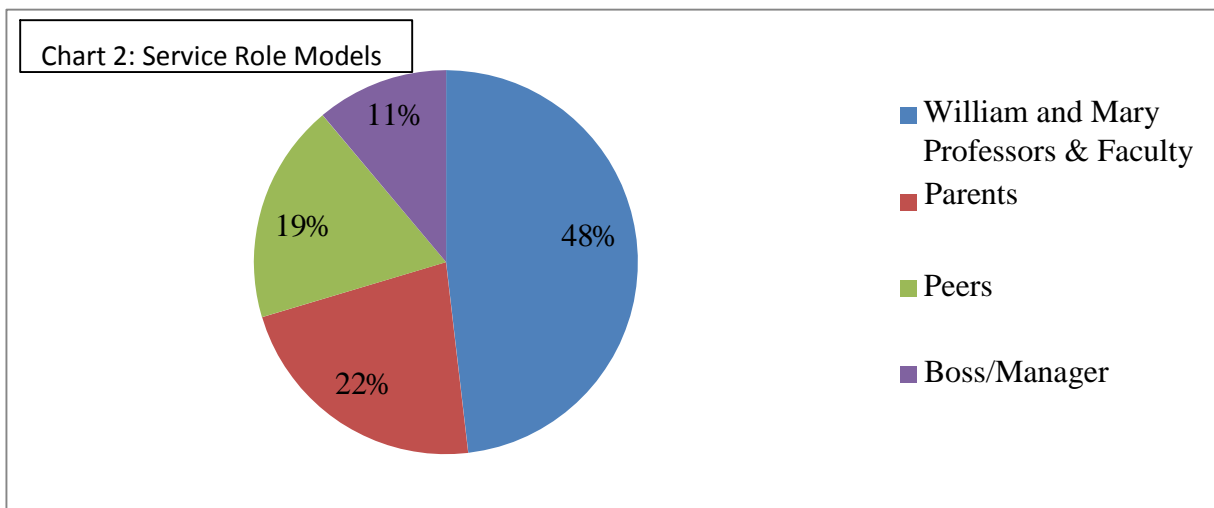
schooling. This could also imply that the alumni were raised in more socio-economically affluent neighborhoods with better-equipped public schools. More importantly, all interviewees stated that they had participated in some sort of community service before attending college, whether that be through their schools, a service group such as Girl Scouts of America, or a church group. Most interviewees claimed that their parents had greatly influenced them to participate in some form of community service, and that their families were of a middle-class background. R.J. Watts, author of “Pushing the Envelope on Youth Civic Engagement: A Developmental and Liberation Psychology Perspective” states that middle-class parents are most likely to encourage and model civic participation for their children (Watts, 2007). This dedication to service at a young age, influenced by parents, could have also made the interviewees seem like more desirable candidates for admission to The College of William and Mary.

More importantly, 75% of interviewees said that both their commitment to service and their personal values continuously impact one another instead of one being the sole influence. Through servicing their local communities, the interviewees stated that their values continue to grow and evolve. In her interview, Megan stated that “I think [my values and commitment to service] both [impact one another] because a lot of the reason I started doing service was because of the values instilled within me, but I think through doing service I have changed my values as I have learned things along the way. It’s a reciprocal relationship (Megan, Class of 2009).” What is most impressive about this is that as the interviewees’ values have changed throughout their lives, they have still all continued to participate in some form of community service. Influenced by parents, the home environment, and their primary schools, the interviewees developed values



supporting a dedication to service at a young age, and continue to be dedicated to service as their core values evolve.

As testaments to the need to inspire dedication to service while citizens are young, the interviewees also unknowingly agreed on the importance of inspiring a deeper commitment to service in younger generations. Chart 1 shows this agreement. Incredibly, 28% of interviewees said that this deeper commitment could be further encouraged by being able to inspire passion to



a cause, 33% said that commitment could develop by showing people the suffering of others who are in need, and 33% said that commitment would develop by providing a space where people would have the ability to serve. These three responses were amazingly given an almost equal number of times throughout the interviews. This is significant because these responses relate to how the interviewees were potentially introduced to service at a young age. Sophie reported that “Exposing students to meaningful service from a young age is critical, and presenting opportunities that make a tangible impact and develop personal relationships is also key. If community service is fun and meaningful – not just a requirement – people will seek it out” (Sophie, Class of 2006). Inspiring passion to a cause, showing the suffering of others, and providing a space to serve create a trio of inspiration for service.

In reflecting upon their time at William and Mary, 86% of the interviewees shared that the College helped foster a deeper commitment to service through providing classes and clubs that focused on community service and employing incredibly strong service role models. (The remaining percentage expressed that they had been committed to service before attending William and Mary, and that William and Mary did not necessarily increase the depth of their commitment.) However, what is most impressive is that 48% of all interviewees declared that their service role models included William and Mary professors and faculty. Chart 2 displays who the alumni categorized as their service role models, with professors surprisingly being mentioned more often than parents. Most professors and faculty mentioned were those working for the Office of Civic Engagement. OCE has not only proven its impact on William and Mary students, but for the past two years has also received The President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll Award. This distinction directly correlates with the interviewees’ responses detailing the impact William and Mary has had on their individual

commitments to service.

One interviewee further defined her experience with service while attending William and Mary. Laura explained that:

“You can’t help but be impressed at William & Mary by how much everyone gives of themselves to others. Whether it’s a professor that takes extra time to meet and talk with you about some research that is so fascinating to you even when the professor has dozens of students and it’s the end of their work day – or an administrator or staff member that helps with a blood drive, or to plan Charter Day, or many other thing that don’t fit within their strict job description – there are so many role models for service to others and your community.” (Laura, Class of 1992)

One alumna also said that it was because William and Mary had the OCE’s Sharpe service- learning program that she chose to attend the College. According to 86% of the interviewed alumni, William and Mary provided many avenues through which they were able to deepen their already developed commitment to service.

CONCLUSION

With 100% of interviewees stating that they had already been dedicated to community service before college, and that their values were already influenced by their commitment to service, it is presumable to say that a lifelong commitment to service is instilled in an individual at a young age, generally within the environment in which he or she is raised. However, with 86% of interviewees agreeing that The College of William and Mary significantly deepened their commitment to service, it can also be said that both the college’s social and learning environments have a definite impact on a student’s community awareness, empathy, and desire to serve.

With 100% of interviewees confessing a current commitment to community service, it can be said that their service experiences as children and their academic and social experiences at William and Mary have deepened their commitment to service enough to ensure a lifelong dedication. The Office of Civic Engagement has especially proven its ability to positively impact William and Mary alumni's lifelong commitment to service through providing service-learning courses, employing service-minded faculty and staff, and acting as a liaison between service groups and trips on campus. In order to gain a better understanding of the impact higher education can have on inspiring a lifelong dedication to service, alumni from other colleges or universities with service-learning programs could also be interviewed as case studies.

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