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Summer Service Learning — What Distinguishes Students Who Choose to Participate from Those Who Do Not?

Part One: Religion, Parents, and Social Awareness

by Mary Beckman and Thomas A. Trozzolo

Since 1980, 2455 Notre Dame students have participated in the Center for Social Concerns' Summer Service Project Internship (SSPI), previously referred to as the Summer Service Program, or SSP. Currently, over 200 students choose this experience yearly. These students spend eight weeks working with disadvantaged populations during the summer, as part of a three-credit course. Students have volunteered in homeless shelters, hospitals, soup kitchens, day care centers, schools, and boys and girls clubs in more than 300 cities since the beginning of the program two decades ago.

Which students are attracted to this intensive summer service and academic program? To assist us in reaching more of our students, as well as in understanding students' developmental processes and why and how they are motivated for involvement, we decided to explore this question.

Research suggests that people who volunteer differ in a variety of ways from those who do not (Allen and Rushton, 1983; Fitch, 1991). Among college students, one finds differences as well (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Serow, 1991), though there is some debate about the nature of those differences (Fitch, 1987). Furthermore, according to Eyler, Giles, and Braxton (1997), college students who participate in service-learning — community service integrated with academic reflection — are significantly different, across a number of measures, from other students. We expected that students who chose summer service learning at Notre Dame would confirm earlier findings, and wanted to know the particular ways that our volunteers would distinguish themselves.

In the fall of 1998, we surveyed 698 students who had never participated in the SSPI. Over the next two years, however, 10% of these students did complete the course. Thus, we had information to examine differences between those from our original group who chose later to do summer service, and those who did not. In this report, we present part one of our findings, focusing on religion, parental community service, the Center for Social Concerns, and campus social awareness programs.

Religion

Religion seems to exert a stronger influence in the lives of those Notre Dame students who seek out summer service learning than of the other group. Both students' religion-related activities and attitudes suggest a more powerful religiosity among those who do summer volunteering.

Of SSPI students, 91.1% report praying weekly, while a lower 83.5% of non-SSPI students indicate the same (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Percentage of students who report practicing these religious activities weekly or more often
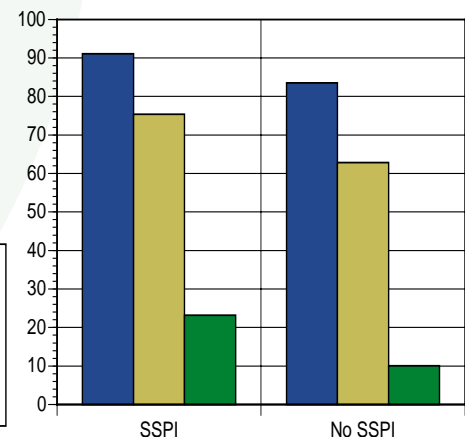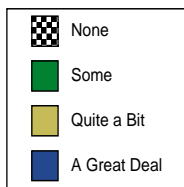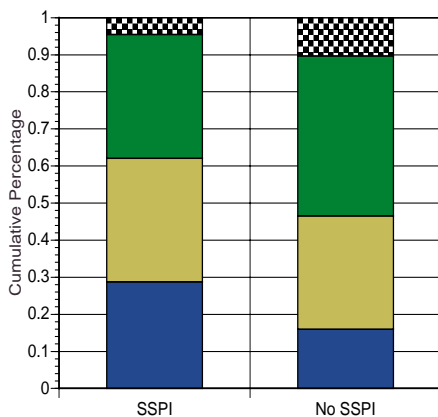
- Pray Privately
- Attend Church
- Read Bible

NDSL Survey, n=698

Figure 2.

Percentage of students who report that their religion provides them daily with guidance

Legend:
- None
- Some
- Quite a Bit
- A Great Deal

NDSL Survey, n=698

Furthermore, students who participate in summer service projects appear, on average, to pray almost daily, while their non-SSPI peers do so a few times a week. Students who choose to participate in summer service report attending church more regularly, with 75.4% going at least weekly, compared to weekly attendance of just 62.8% of the non-SSPI students. Among the SSPI students, 23.2% say they read the Bible on a weekly basis; just 10.1% of non-SSPI students appear to read the Bible each week.

Religion seems to provide more day to day guidance to the students who participate in summer service-learning (see Figure 2). Religion offers a great deal of daily direction to 28.8% of SSPI participants. In contrast, just 16.0% of non-SSPI students report the same. Furthermore, non-SSPI undergraduates tend to view God as more remote than do SSPI students. Among non-SSPI students, 40.3% believe that the statement "God is distant" is fairly, mostly, or extremely true, while just 21.4% of SSPI students report holding this belief. Also, 41.1% of SSPI students feel the statement that God is distant to be false, compared to 31.0% for the non-SSPI students (see Figure 3).
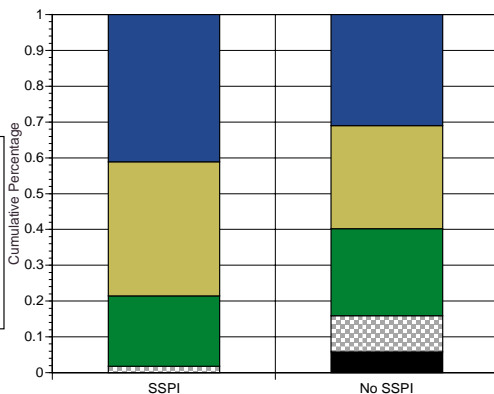
Parents' Community Service

Evidence suggests that high school volunteering is correlated with college community service (Winniford,

Figure 3.

Percentage of students who perceive God as "distant."

Legend:
- Not at all True
- Slightly True
- Fairly True
- Mostly True
- Extremely True
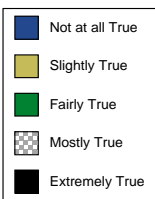
NDSL Survey, n=698

Carpenter and Grider, 1995; Astin, 1991; Serow, 1991); also, students who volunteer in secondary school are more likely to engage in service-learning in college (Eyler-Walker, 1997). While our data suggest that Notre Dame students who do summer service have indeed volunteered during high school, this factor does not distinguish them from those who do not do summer service (see Figure 4). Both groups can be characterized as active to very active pre-college volunteers.

Figure 4.

Percentage of students and their parents who are very active in community service (student reported)

Legend:
- Parents
- Student
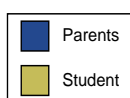
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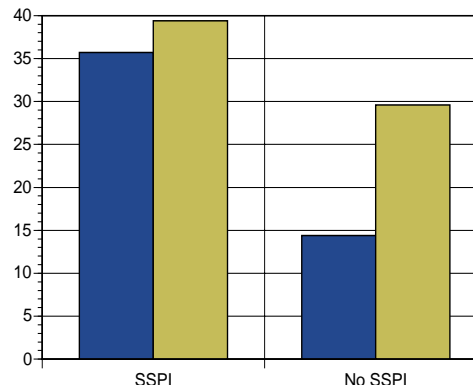
Parental community service, however, does differentiate the groups. SSPI participants' parents are nearly three times more likely to be "very active" in community service than non-SSPI parents (35.7% vs. 14.4%). As well, non-SSPI students were more likely to have parents that had done no community service. This result is in keeping with, though slightly different from, evidence found by Eyler-Walker (1997), suggesting that family experience with service is predictive of student service-learning participation in college.

Influence on Spiritual and Educational Development

Students were asked to indicate how strongly each of a number of individuals and campus entities -- e.g., faculty, courses, peers, Campus Ministry, Student Government -- influenced their spiritual and educational development. We report all of our findings on this question in our next research report. Here, we discuss the role of three influences: parents, the Center for Social Concerns, and campus social awareness activities.

For both groups, parents appear to exert a dominant influence, as other studies have likewise shown (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Winniford, Carpenter, and Grider, 1995). The influence, however, is stronger for SSPI students.

The Center for Social Concerns was reported as a dominant or major contributor to the spiritual and educational development of 53.6% of the SSPI stu-

dents; the figure is a much lower 18.7% for students in the other group. SSPI student responses show that 46.4% perceive campus social awareness events (which may, indeed, include activities carried out or sponsored by the Center for Social Concerns) as dominant or major influences. In contrast, just 19.2% of the non-SSPI students indicate that these activities are dominant or major contributors in their spiritual and educational development (see Figure 5).

Among many Center for Social Concerns activities that students may be thinking of when they respond that the Center influences their development are one-credit seminars. These include academic immersion and service experiences of anywhere from two days to a week in duration. Forty-one percent of SSPI participants had taken one of these seminars, while 17% in the non-SSPI group had done so. Social awareness programs could include an array of courses and events conducted throughout the year by Institutes, Centers, and academic departments.

Summary and Reflections

Some evidence indicates that the factors that initially encourage students to work in volunteer organizations are different from those that cause them to continue to do so (Deci, 1975; Ilsley, 1990). Once involved, students' volunteer work becomes "simply an accepted part of who they are" (Ilsley, 1990, p. 36); there may be a kind of inertia that then propels them. We found that both the SSPI and the non-SSPI students tended to be active volunteers prior to college. And while the non-SSPI students may have continued to do community service in college, they did not choose to make the greater commitment of time that is required of the eight-week summer service project. Why did one group continue to invest in volunteering through the SSPI, while the others did not?

Our results suggest that religiosity makes a difference. This conclusion is supported elsewhere (Winniford, Carpenter, and Grider, 1995), including in our own previous research (see Research Report 2). For ex-
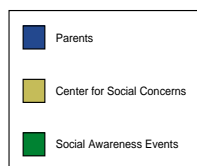
Methodology

As part of a larger study, a representative cross-section of 698 undergraduates in residence at the University of Notre Dame during the 1998-1999 academic year completed a survey concerning student participation, attitudes, and beliefs regarding social issues, faith, service, and justice. The sixteen-page survey instrument yielded nearly 700 variables. To achieve a sample size of 668 out of approximately 4000 eligible undergraduates, we mailed the survey to a sample of 1775 Notre Dame sophomores, juniors, and seniors. This allows us to be 95 percent certain that our respondents' answers are accurate to within three percentage points of the true responses of all Notre Dame sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The demographic characteristics of the students are comparable to those of each class. Most of the findings reported here are statistically significant at the *p* < .01 level. Further information on the research design is available from the authors.

ample, in a study comparing volunteers to students doing other extracurricular activities and those engaged in neither, Fitch found that those with the "lowest level of religiosity" were "uninvolved in any activities."

He concluded that "high service involvement of the more religious-oriented students is probably due to the emphasis that most religions place on service to others" (1991, p. 538). Indeed, religious values promoting service may have led our SSPI cohort into the summer program.

Furthermore, the additional experience of parental modeling of service may have enhanced students' desire to volunteer once in college. As Winniford, Carpenter, and Grider (1995) concluded from their own study, "…students felt a greater obligation to be involved in service because of the role models that their parents provided" (p. 35). Our evidence supports other findings that students are highly influenced by their parents; moreover, SSPI students were revealed to be more affected by their parents than the members of the other student cohort. If these powerful influences are acting as volunteer role models for their offspring, a stronger sense of social responsibility may be promoted than in the non-SSPI group, strong enough to lead them beyond less time intensive community work and into the more demanding SSPI.

What have we learned here that might help us, and readers at other institutions, attract a broad range of students into programs that intend to develop moral and civic responsibility? First, students' explorations of religious values and practices can be encouraged. We do this currently at the Center through a variety of courses and other activities in which Catholic social teaching is prominent, and by directing students to Campus Ministry, courses on religion, and other related activities. The SSPI is, in fact, currently an academic course listed in Notre Dame's Theology

Figure 5.

Percentage of students who indicated these contributors were dominant or important to their spiritual and educational development (by rank order for SSPI students)

Parents
Center for Social Concerns
Social Awareness Events

NDSL Survey, n=698

Department. Next, evidence here suggests it would be worthwhile to engage more students in the offerings of the Center for Social Concerns, as well as in other social awareness programs. Finally, though it is unlikely our institutions could influence high school students' parents to volunteer, it might be feasible to identify through the admissions process those students whose parents have participated in community service. These might be a likely audience for SSPI-type opportunities.

In Research Report 4, we will present more information about the differences between students who undertake summer service-learning and those who do not.

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