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Service Learning Students' Perceptions of Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the conceptions of citizenship held by students engaged in a service learning course. Open-ended responses to instructor-developed surveys were analyzed. Results indicated that students primarily viewed good citizenship in terms of community service; however, their ideas about service were limited to passive kinds of service such as helping others and volunteering, rather than active kinds of service such as community organizing. Results were compared with conceptions of citizenship held by students engaged in another course with a smaller volunteering component. Opportunities for broadening service learning students' understanding of citizenship are discussed.
Keywords: citizenship, civic engagement, service learning

INTRODUCTION

Preparing students for active citizenship is a critical goal of a liberal arts education. Hollister, Wilson, and Levine (2008) argue that it is important for the well-being of our democracy; they also note that contemporary students are arriving at college expecting to be engaged in civic endeavors as part of their education. Students often come to college with previous service experience that may be tied to their elementary, middle, or high school education. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (2011) states that 44% of high schools offered service learning opportunities for youth in 2004. Indeed, service learning is pervasive on college campuses today, with roughly one-third of college students from Campus Compact membership institutions participating in service learning and related civic engagement activities during the 2008-2009 academic year (Campus Compact, 2009). The existence of Campus Compact, a national affiliation of university and college presidents committed to service learning and civic engagement with nearly 1,200 members (Campus Compact, n.d.), is itself evidence of the support today for service learning in higher education.

Service learning is believed to have a range of educational benefits for students. For example, Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) found gains in students' academic performance, self-efficacy, values, and career choice. Among the proposed benefits of service learning is the opportunity for students to strengthen their citizenship skills. This study assesses students' conceptions of citizenship while enrolled in a service learning class. It seeks to understand students' perceptions of the elements of "good citizenship." Do students engaged in service learning view active engagement in their communities as a critical aspect of citizenship? Having become aware of social justice issues by virtue of their participation, do students engaged in service learning view citizenship as political participation through advocacy and community organizing for social change? Conceptions of citizenship among service learning students are also compared with conceptions of citizenship among students in a course with a more limited volunteer component.

Service learning involves courses that tie academic content to real-world service experiences through structured opportunities for reflection. It is believed that service learning impacts students' citizenship; in fact, this is

considered a defining feature of service learning. For example, Bringle and Hatcher (1996) define service learning as follows:

> We view service learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way so as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 222)

Indeed, the citizenship element is often used to help distinguish service learning from internships and field practica. It is proposed that service learning enhances students' citizenship skills while internships are aimed at strengthening students' professional skills. In other words, service learning offers students an opportunity to practice their roles in the community while internships offer students the opportunity to practice their professional roles.

The theoretical underpinnings of service learning may be found in the work of John Dewey (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Dewey believed in learning through reflection of hands-on experiences, and he maintained that education should facilitate the development of educated citizens (Dewey, 1944). Eyler and Giles (1999) suggest that there are five elements of citizenship: values, knowledge, skills, efficacy, and commitment. They suggest that service learning has the potential to impact all five of these elements. Additionally, Eyler and Giles propose three basic forms of civic participation, which include political participation, organizational participation, and informal social support. Similarly, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) put forth a theoretical framework of three types of citizens: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. In their view, the personally responsible citizen is one who strives to obey the law and to be good. The participatory citizen is one who takes a more active role in community life through collective community action. Finally, the justice-oriented citizen is concerned with understanding social movements and pursuing social change. Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) citizenship types are used as a conceptual framework for analysis of data in this study.

Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, and Zukin (2002) studied the civic engagement attitudes and practices of contemporary young adults and found that they were politically cynical and uninvolved, volunteered when required to do so or for self-serving purposes, and had passive conceptions of citizenship that often involved being law-abiding people and taking care of themselves and their families. Similarly, Lopez et al. (2006) found that while many young Americans ages 15 to 25 are involved in their communities in various ways, 17% had not participated in any of 19 civic engagement activities in the year prior to being surveyed. They also found that individuals in this age range have poor political knowledge.

Evidence suggests that service learning may impact students' civic engagement. For example, Ethridge (2006) found service learning to be an effective vehicle for promoting active citizenship in her case study of three early childhood education courses. Mobley (2007) found service learning led to statistically significant changes in students' perceptions of homeless individuals in comparison with a control group of students who participated in the course but were not engaged in the service learning project. In another study, service learning students performed significantly higher on a civic engagement survey than non-service learning students (Prentice, 2007). The survey was conducted with students from several community colleges and included questions relevant to a broad range of civic activities, such as voting, writing a letter to a newspaper, and commitment to future volunteering.

The studies identified above are limited in that they have no longitudinal component so they do not indicate whether students' new civic attitudes and behaviors persisted over time. Taylor and Pancer (2007) included a two-month follow-up in their study of undergraduate students engaged in coursework with a community field placement. They found that students who continued volunteering with field sites following course completion scored higher on the Inventory of Service Experience (ISE), a measure intended to assess the degree to which they felt supported in these experiences by

family, friends, and the organizations, and the degree to which they had a positive field experience. However, their measure does not assess the enhancement or maintenance of civic attitudes and skills.

Civic engagement may be conceived as a developmental process. Some researchers propose that early experiences in civic engagement matter and have long-term consequences. In a review of literature on the long-term outcomes of youth community involvement, Younniss, McLellan, and Yates (1997) found an association between youth engagement and adult civic behavior. Their review shows that involved youth are more likely to be involved adults than youth who are not engaged in community activities. Janoski, Musick, and Wilson (1998) studied the long-term impact of volunteering on high school students. They found an association between high school volunteering and young adults' volunteering practices; however, they suggest it is the fostering of pro-social civic attitudes in youth through such volunteering experience that matters most over the long-term. Borden and Serido (2009) proposed a three-phase model of youth civic engagement, including participation in a youth center, connection and engagement through relationship building with peers and adults, and expansion of engagement in the broader community. The model is based on focus groups with young people from a youth empowerment center; its generalizability is unknown.

Balsano (2005) posits that youth civic engagement through service-oriented activities promotes positive youth development and that the lack of such experiences may put youth at a developmental disadvantage. Along these lines, evidence suggests that there is a civic achievement gap between white, higher-income, and native-born youth and minority, lower-income, and immigrant youth, with political disadvantages for the latter group (Levinson, 2007). Texts that focus on supporting youth at risk point to the promise of service learning in fostering a sense of purpose and competency in these youth (for example, Barr & Parrett, 2001, and Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990).

Further research is warranted in order to understand how to best prepare college students and other youth for active citizenship. Eyler (2000) suggests empirical research is needed that focuses on whether service learning impacts students' political and community action knowledge and skills. Kahne, Westheimer, and Rogers (2000) propose that we need to have a better understanding of what kinds of citizens service learning programs aim to develop, how students conceive of themselves as citizens, and "what conception of 'good' citizenship is fostered by participating in service tied to an academic curriculum" (p. 5).

The present study examines students' conceptions of citizenship while participating in a service learning course. The study seeks to understand what features of citizenship stand out to students who are engaged in service learning. In other words, in a world where youth are generally believed to be apathetic and disinterested, how do college students engaged in service learning define "good citizenship"?

METHOD

Seventy-seven students were surveyed during their participation in a service learning course. This included students in four sections of "Community Services for Families" which were taught between Fall 2008 and Fall 2009 at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. Two sections (36 students) were surveyed in the middle of the semester while the remaining sections were surveyed at the end of the semester. The data for all four courses were combined with no attempt to differentiate between students surveyed at the middle or end of the semester.

Community Services for Families is a required course for students who major in family studies. Family Studies majors typically go on to direct service work in social service organizations or to further study in marriage and family therapy, family law, education, or other relevant fields. As part of this course, teams of students engage in service learning projects at local community organizations. For example, teams of students helped plan and implement a Halloween food drive in conjunction with a community agency aimed at educating and

empowering youth to work against poverty and other community needs. Other teams worked in public schools to organize college awareness events. Teams typically consist of about four students and each student is required to give a minimum of fifty hours to the project, including on-site and off-site time. Course content focuses on assessment of community needs; program planning, management, and evaluation; and effective leadership and teamwork. Multiple opportunities for student reflection are provided with peers, faculty, and site supervisors throughout the semester.

These 77 students represent a self-selected group of students who chose to major in Family Studies. Their results are compared with the results of an additional 36 students who completed a similar survey at the end of their participation in two sections of "Family Resources" taught in Spring 2009. This elective course fulfills a general education requirement for students from all majors and is also a requirement for Family Studies majors. For Family Studies majors, it is typically taken prior to Community Services for Families. Course content focuses on identifying and understanding family needs and corresponding family and community resources. These sections included a global perspective on family resource management (as discussed in Falk, 2011). The two sections of the course included in this study involved a volunteer component in which students were required to identify an organization relevant to family studies, and to provide a minimum of five service hours to that organization over the course of the semester. Students completed a brief written reflection paper following completion of their volunteering and were required to make connections between the volunteer experience and course content.

The survey included several open-ended questions that related to different aspects of the course. Students' written responses to the question, "What does it mean to be a good citizen?" are analyzed for the purposes of this paper. A total of four individuals left this question blank. Following multiple reviews of the responses, including identification of key themes, a coding scheme was developed. The final codes used are as follows:

1. Being Good: Any phrase that mentions ethical behavior, doing the right thing, caring or being concerned, being nice, being understanding and open-minded, obeying laws or following the rules, or being respectful.

2. Being Informed: Any phrase that mentions knowledge or understanding of community needs or current issues.

3. Serving: Any phrase that mentions helping others, serving the community, giving back to the community, being engaged or involved, or volunteering.

4. Working toward Social Change: Any phrase that mentions making social impact or social change or simply change or improvements.

5. Qualitative Aspects of Good Citizenship: Any phrase that discusses the qualitative aspects of being a good citizen, such as the responsibility it requires, getting nothing back, or stepping out of one's comfort zone.

Student responses were then analyzed a second time using an existing conceptual model, specifically Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three citizenship types described above in the literature review. This analysis was conducted because the three citizen types seemed very similar and related to the major themes and codes that emerged from the data. Each response was therefore coded as either an example of the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, or the justice-oriented citizen. Some responses were coded as "vague" if the response did not provide enough information to be categorized in Westheimer and Kahne's framework, while other responses were categorized as "misdirected" if the response did not seem to directly address the question.

RESULTS

General Themes

As indicated in Figure 1, students in the service learning course most readily associated good citizenship with service. Sixty-four percent of students defined good citizenship in ways that included service activities such as helping others, serving the community, and volunteering. For example, one student wrote, "A good citizen is getting involved in the

community and volunteering, helping others." Another student suggested that being a good citizen is, "To be active in one's community and contribute positively to society." A third student wrote, "Being a good citizen is giving your time to your community and helping others who need help."

Figure 1: Good Citizenship Themes (n=77)
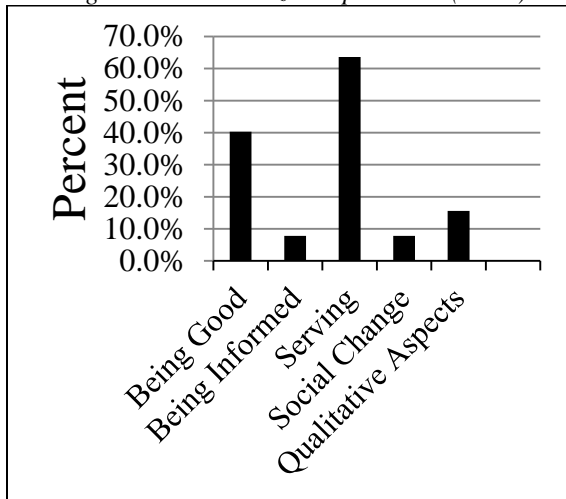
Two-fifths of students defined good citizenship as being related to being a good person (40%). For example, one student wrote, "Know right from wrong, ethical behavior/decisions." Another wrote, "Giving to your community with good intention and most importantly, ethical standards." A final student suggested that to be a good citizen, "Be respectful, ethical, follow laws, be open-minded…."

Fewer students (8%) wrote that good citizenship requires knowledge and understanding of community needs and issues. Only six students made statements such as good citizenship is about "Be[ing] aware of what is going on around you…," and "A good citizen is aware of issues in their community…." Similarly, only a few students (8%) defined good citizenship as having to do with social change. The clearest statement that fell into this category was, "To be an advocate for all and move toward making a social impact/change." Another student wrote, "A good citizen is a member who engages in the community so that every individual is guaranteed their fundamental rights. It is about taking a stand for what is

right…." Finally, 16% of students wrote about various qualitative aspects of citizenship. One student described good citizenship as "social responsibilities." One student noted that good citizenship is "very important" and another suggested that good citizens "…enjoy what [they] are a part of." Others wrote about doing more than what is required, doing one's best, and potentially getting nothing in return.

Citizenship Types

Data were analyzed a second time using Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three citizenship types. Results are depicted in Figure 2. The majority of students' responses (68%) fell into the personally responsible category—that is, responses that indicated an awareness of, interest in, and concern for society but that lacked leadership, drive, initiative, or vision. Examples of such responses include, "Doing things that help your community. Obeying the law," and "Upstanding and up to date with current events and news in the community." Other responses in this category include, "Be aware of what is going on around you, be supportive of others, help others, be understanding," and "Be courteous to others, not selfish, be kind."

Figure 2: Good Citizenship Based Upon Westheimer and Kahne (2004) Categories (n = 77)
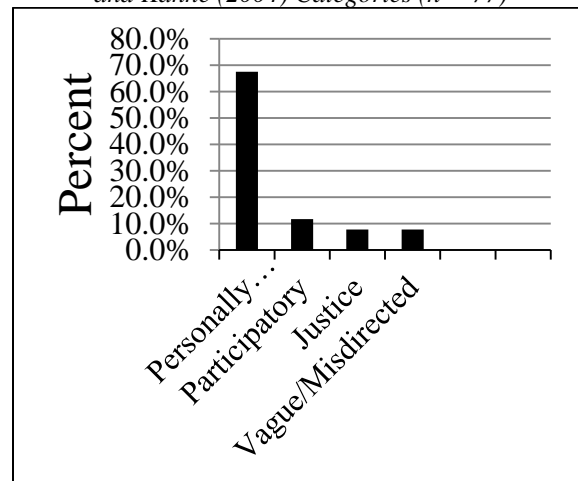

Far fewer responses (12%) fell into Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) participatory citizenship type. These responses suggested that good citizenship involves not only concern but also active engagement in the community in a leadership capacity. In other words, good

citizenship for these individuals involved not only volunteering when asked to do so but also seeking out opportunities for community engagement and organizing others to become involved as well. Responses in this category included, for example, "A good citizen means to be willing to help the community," and "To be active in one's community and contribute positively to society." Another representative response is, "A good citizen is one that engages in the community and reaches out to serve the community."

Only a few responses (8%) fell into Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) justice-oriented citizenship type. These responses suggested good citizenship involves commitment to and active pursuit of social justice and social change and were the same as those in the social change category in the first analysis. Examples of these responses include, "Concerned with social issues in your community and exploring ways to address problems," and "To be a good citizen means a person is actively working to improve the standards of society."

Figure 3: Comparison of Responses from Service Learners and Volunteers
(service learners n=77, volunteers n=36)
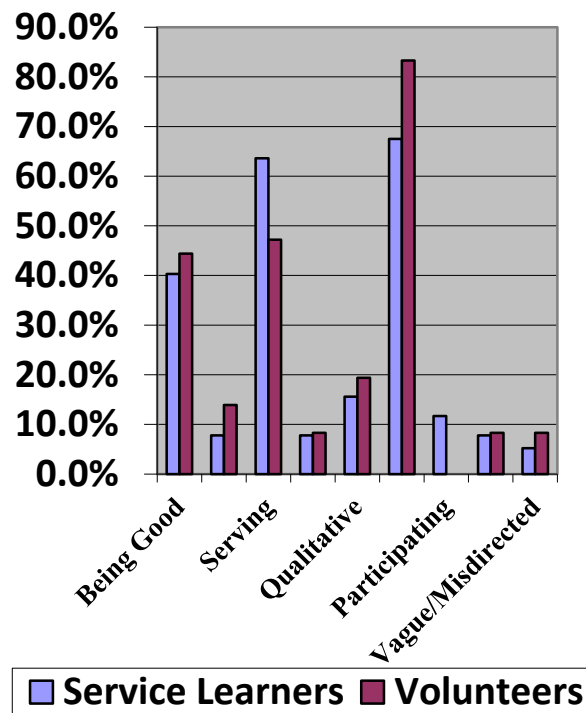
Finally, results of the service learning students were compared with results of the students from the other course who volunteered fewer hours. The same general pattern of responses emerged for this group. However, Family Resources students, who were not exposed to service learning, were less likely than Community Services for Families students to discuss citizenships in terms of service (47% versus 64%). Along the same lines, volunteers were more likely to view citizenship as personal responsibility (83% versus 68%), including being good people, taking care of friends and family, obeying the law, and the like, and none of their responses were categorized in Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) participatory citizen type.

DISCUSSION

Through initial coding and analysis of data, serving emerged as the dominant theme in service learners' descriptions of good citizenship. Students wrote about good citizens being "willing to help." One student suggested, "You can do this by volunteering, helping a neighbor, or donating money or items." Some students suggested good citizenship involves "being active in your community." Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that students enrolled in a course focused on service learning would define citizenship primarily in terms of service. The fact that the students enrolled in the course are majors in family studies may even exacerbate the issue, as these are students preparing for careers in helping professions.

A second analysis of the data using Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three citizenship types found the highest number of responses fell into their personally responsible citizenship type rather than the participatory citizenship type. This is largely because Westheimer and Kahne (2004) define personally responsible citizenship as not merely being a nice person and abiding by laws, but also volunteering and helping out when asked. They describe participatory citizenship as having a greater active element, one that involves leadership, motivation, and initiative. Thus, many of the phrases that were initially coded under the theme of service were, in the second

analysis, coded as personally responsible leadership rather than participatory leadership. In other words, students who described good citizenship in terms of service in this study tended to refer to service in relatively passive ways such as volunteering rather than strategic or visionary ways such as organizing a protest or leading a community initiative.

Based on Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) framework, 12% of service-learning students' responses fell into the participatory citizenship type and only a few responses fell into the justice-oriented citizenship type. Thus, the findings of this study seem to suggest a relatively uninvolved and passive conception of citizenship. However, the findings are not as bleak as those described by Andolina, Jenkins, Ketter, and Zukin (2002). In that study, researchers concluded that young people viewed citizenship as primarily about obeying the law and taking care of one's family; volunteering was discussed in terms of school requirements and self-serving motivations.

It is important to reiterate the low number of responses relevant to social justice and social change. Very few respondents described good citizenship in these terms. Also, while some respondents mentioned obeying the laws and keeping current on social issues, respondents did not discuss political engagement. One respondent stated that good citizenship involves "Actively participating in a good democracy…" which may be alluding to political engagement but it is not clear. Specifically, no respondents mentioned voting as part of good citizenship. No respondents mentioned running for or holding a political office as good citizenship. No respondents mentioned petitioning. A few respondents mentioned advocacy but it was not clear whether political or legislative advocacy was intended by these responses. This may be a factor of the participants' interests as majors in family studies and future human service professionals. It could also be related to the specific course content, which focuses primarily on program planning and evaluation and teamwork and leadership skills rather than theories of civic engagement or community organizing and social change.

The final analysis compares responses of students enrolled in the service learning course, Community Services for Families, with responses of students enrolled in a course with a more limited volunteering requirement, Family Resources. The results of this analysis suggest that the experience of service learning may contribute to students' notions that service is a part of good citizenship and may help students to move toward a more engaged, participatory definition of citizenship. Even though only 12% of the service learners' responses fell into Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) participatory citizenship type, it is striking to note in contrast that none of the volunteers' responses fell into this category.

As noted by Kahne, Westheimer, and Rogers (2000), we need to consider the aims of our service learning initiatives with respect to citizenship. Is fostering a conception of good citizenship that is defined by community service sufficient? If not, how can service learning courses be enhanced to promote other aspects of good citizenship?

There are many possible ways to foster a broader and deeper conception of citizenship within the context of service learning. First, course content can focus on citizenship, including readings and discussions about the meaning of citizenship and rights, roles, and responsibilities of citizens. Students can be taught about legislative processes and the roles of individuals and community organizations in advocating for social and legislative change. In conjunction with their service learning experience, students can be required to study relevant social issues and can be given opportunities to engage in other kinds of civic activities such as writing letters to legislators or editorials to newspapers, visiting legislators, and attending public meetings. Reflection assignments and exercises can be focused on making connections between course content, service learning, and civic engagement activities in order to foster a fuller conception of citizenship. Similarly, Megivern (2010) proposes a social justice education framework for service learning courses focusing on local public policy issues. An interdisciplinary approach may be warranted.

Using service learning as a vehicle for fostering a rich appreciation of citizenship and the roles of citizens in our society seems

appropriate. However, if one believes that one of the fundamental purposes of a liberal education is to prepare young people for responsible citizenship, then clearly, service learning cannot be the only and may not be the most important tactic for institutions of higher education to use toward this end. Requiring core classes in government and political science, promoting active student governance, and offering a wide range of extracurricular service activities are some other approaches that colleges and universities may use to foster students' civic and political engagement. Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) provide case examples of how 12 higher education institutions have integrated civic education into their campuses.

It is also important to note that there is ultimately no "one size fits all" answer to good citizenship. It is not clear that we can all be community activists or community leaders or that we can all be actively working toward social change. In other words, there is a need for citizens who are willing to engage and capable of engaging in different ways. Additionally, if we consider citizenship as perhaps a continuum of involvement, and as a developmental process, perhaps activities such as service learning may be able to help students move toward higher levels of engagement.

Measures that assess civic engagement are required to advance empirical research and understanding of the impact of service learning on civic engagement. Pre/post studies are required, as well as studies involving control groups, and longitudinal studies that follow students into their adult life. Studies that focus on actual behavior rather than self-perceptions are also needed.

LIMITATIONS

This study relies on qualitative data from instructor-developed course evaluation forms. The survey was also administered by the course instructor, which may have impacted students' responses. The study assesses student responses to a question regarding the meaning of good citizenship. It does not examine students' perceptions of their own civic engagement or students' actual civic knowledge, behavior, or skills.

Students completed this evaluation while enrolled in undergraduate family studies courses. However, their responses to the question about the meaning of good citizenship may be more or less influenced by their experience in these courses and also whether they completed the survey in the middle or at the end of the semester. This study does not explicitly examine the impact of service learning on students' conceptions of service learning. No data on demographics were collected so the study also does not examine associations between demographics and students' perceptions of citizenship.

Service learning participants in this study took the class over the duration of a year and a half, in three different semesters. While the overall structure of the course remained constant during this period, various modifications were made to the course that may have impacted students' responses. For example, later iterations of the course incorporated some of the strategies noted above such as legislative letter-writing exercises and more focused study of the social justice issues pertinent to their field placements and/or projects.

CONCLUSION

This study found that students engaged in service learning primarily defined good citizenship in terms of community service. However, students tended to describe more passive types of service such as helping others and volunteering rather than more active forms of service such as community outreach and organizing. While it is not surprising that students engaged in service learning would identify community service as a key component of good citizenship, there may be ways to use service learning to broaden students' conceptions of citizenship. Furthermore, institutions of higher education that are committed to fostering the development of responsible citizens may complement service learning with several other strategies to cultivate good citizenship among youth.

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