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Length of College Service Experience Effect on Future Life Over Time

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Abstract

The college experience offers many opportunities for students to become engaged in service activities. Most studies about these activities have been conducted on populations of students who have either just completed their service activity or just graduated from college. Inconsistent findings on how the length of service activities during college influence choices later in life have left researchers unsure of the value in lengthening service opportunities. To determine if the length of service makes a difference on benefits associated with service, an online survey of 277 former college student volunteers ranging in age from 21 to 71 was completed. Findings showed a positive effect with the length of service on future service attitudes, dispositions, and behavior. The study found that as the length of the time period volunteers served for one organization in college increased, the more likely they were to give service later in life, value giving service to others in need, and believe they could make a difference in their community.

Introduction and Literature Review

General Benefits of Service in College

In general, the benefits of service in college have been well-documented. They include both short- and long-term outcomes for students and communities. The development of citizenship and social responsibility in college students has re-emerged as a central part of higher education (Jones & Abes, 2004). Performing volunteer work as a college student has been found as a predictor of student involvement to promote volunteerism post-college (Sax, 2004).

Many studies document an increased sense of citizenship as an outcome of doing service in college (Kahn, Westheimer, & Rogers, 2000; Reinke, 2003). Astin, Sax, and Avalos (1999) found that volunteerism in college results in students becoming more socially responsible and more dedicated to community service. Two studies specifically found that service learning is a predictor of political engagement (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Denson, Vogelgesdang, & Saenz, 2005). Tennenbaum and Berrett (2005) found that service learning involvement increased students' social awareness, including increased understanding of how to become more involved in one's community and increased awareness of community needs.

Another benefit of service experiences is the development of personal efficacy. Personal efficacy is a core belief that one's actions can make a difference through challenging goals. Patterson and Kelleher (2005) stated that psychological research suggests that one's self-efficacy beliefs serve as a filter through which a person evaluates past experiences and makes judgments about decisions when trying to decide on future accomplishments. As a result of these past experiences, self-efficacy beliefs define a person's sense of personal mastery and confidence in abilities to make an impact. According to Phillips, Harper, and Gamble (2007), personal efficacy—the belief in one's abilities—paves the way for future community involvement. These findings agree with findings of Astin, Sax, and Avalos (1999) that "being a volunteer during college…is associated with a greater sense of empowerment in the years after college" (p. 197). The amount of service time carries additional benefits beyond those benefits associated with the type of service performed, especially in the areas of civic responsibility and life skill development. (Astin & Sax, 1998).

These findings are strongly supported by similar study results of the national taskforce reviewing the eight-year impact of service with AmeriCorps. Taskforce researchers found that:

> The most important civic impact on [AmeriCorps] members is, perhaps, a sense of empowerment or self-efficacy—a strong belief that one can make a difference. In addition, State and National and NCCC [National Civilian Community Corps] members have greater confidence in their ability to work with local

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government to address community needs" (Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development, 2008, p. 18.)

Effect of the Length of College Service Activities on Future Outcomes

The commonly held definition of service learning includes that it lasts at least a half of a semester (Eyler, 2000), however, there are few studies that address the impact of the service duration on the outcomes related to service in college. Conrad and Hedin (1982) found that experiential education experiences lasting for at least a semester were associated with better outcomes. Mabry (1998) found that service hours are positively associated with academic learning. In their 1998 study, Astin and Sax included a variable related to service duration. They asked respondents to indicate the number of months they had devoted to service participation in the past year. The length of service showed significant effects on 34 of their 35 outcome measures. After controlling for type of service activity, length of service had an impact primarily on civic responsibility and life skills. There was some impact on knowledge gained related to increased knowledge in the discipline area related to the service. In a 1999 study, Astin, Sax, and Avalos found that the number of hours a student spent volunteering in their senior year or last year of college had a significant effect on whether they volunteered five years later. In a qualitative study based on intensive interviews, Stelljes (2008) found that an intensive service commitment led to long-term commitment to improve social conditions. Knapp, Fisher, and Levesque-Bristol (2010) found that programs that involved students in at least seven weeks and 30 hours of service had the strongest positive effects on the impact of college service. According to a meta-analysis on service learning effects, Conway, Amel, and Gerwien (2009) concluded that larger changes in participant outcomes were associated with more hours and a greater length of service.

Although not related directly to length of service, some studies have looked at the quality of the service commitment as a proxy variable for intensity of the commitment required to perform the service. Morton (1995) developed three separate paradigms of service: 1) charity, 2) project, and 3) social change. The first paradigm, charity, is defined as a short-term volunteer activity focused on providing resources to the community. The project paradigm requires a longer commitment

because participants engage with the program itself and complete a specific task, such as creating a community garden. The social change paradigm requires the most commitment as it involves community building and leadership. Based on Morton's research, Weerts, Ciabrera, and Meyas (2014) developed classes of civic behaviors in college that also reflect varying time commitments: (a) super engagers; (b) social cultural engagers; (c) apolitical engagers; and (d) non-engagers.

Studies That Focus on College Service Participants Over Time

Most studies of the impact of service on college students are conducted at the end of the service activity, at the end of the college experience, or shortly after graduating. A few studies have surveyed or interviewed former students who participated in service activities. One study by Jones and Abes (2004) followed up on a report by Jones and Hill (2001) entitled "Crossing High Street Study." In the Jones and Abes study, students were interviewed less than one year after they had completed a service learning course. The results showed that the students had "produced only a snapshot of understanding about themselves" (Jones and Abes, 2004). In the follow-up study by Jones and Hill, different students in the same class as the earlier study were interviewed two to four years after they completed the course. The follow-up study found the following themes: (a) service to others becomes integral to self; (b) there is a shift in the nature of commitments including career decisions; and (c) there is an increased open-mindedness about new people, experiences, and ideas, including an interest in critical thinking and viewing their situation from multiple perspectives. Another longitudinal study by Denson, Vogelgesang, and Saenz (2005) followed entering college students in 1994 through their college years and into early adulthood. This study found that respondents who participated in service learning during college, as compared to those who reported no service learning in college, tended to be more politically engaged in the post-college years.

Background

Most of the members of the research team in this study participated as faculty coordinators in the Energy Express program and their experience became the impetus for the study. Since the inception of the West Virginia Energy Express in 1993, an eight-week "print rich" summer literacy program, AmeriCorps members have completed a post assessment. The assessment included questions

related to helping people in the community to bring about change. Benefits of this program include: (a) having a strong attachment to one's community; (b) caring about larger political and social issues affecting the community; (c) keeping informed about what can be done to meet community needs; (d) making a difference in the community; (e) partnering with other community groups; (f) conducting community needs assessments; and (g) reflecting on service experiences. Documented outcomes of the program with college-age volunteers have also included improved ability to work with children, attitudes toward service, and confidence levels in their ability to make a difference in the community (Phillips, Harper, & Gamble, 2007).

The evaluation of Energy Express led the researchers to ask whether the benefits of the Energy Express experience for college students continued as they moved through adulthood. Two themes guided the research project—the factors that influence future commitment to service and the life choices that are impacted by participation in service activities in college. The research team considered these factors that may influence future service: (a) involvement in service activities in high school; (b) amount of service (hours, days, months, years); (c) duration and intensity of the service experience (doing the same service activity over a long period of time); (d) service involving direct interaction with people versus indirect service activities, such as office work, construction; (e) reflection on service activities; and (f) service with the Energy Express program versus other service choices. Future life qualities and decisions the team thought might be impacted by service in college included: (a) choice of graduate school major; (b) choice of career; (c) selection of life partner; (d) parenting style; (e) use of expendable income; and (f) decision to continue to give service. A quantitative study was designed to explore the following questions: (a) what are the factors related to service in the college years that influence future commitment to service, and (b) what are the impacts of service during the college years on later life?

Research Questions Discussed in this Paper

In this paper, the research team is reporting findings related to one factor that influences future service—duration of the service activity. Future studies will discuss other factors and other life qualities. The research question is: Does the duration of the service activity for one organization have an impact on one or more life quality characteristics?

Methodology

An online survey questionnaire was developed by the research team with several categories including demographics, attitudes toward service, length of service in college, effect on life decisions, college majors, changes in area of study, career choice, parenting behaviors, and current volunteer activities. A pilot survey was conducted with 26 participants. The survey was then revised and submitted for the approval of the West Virginia University (WVU) Institutional Review Board. It was approved as an exempt study.

The survey sample was drawn using listservs from various groups associated with colleges in West Virginia that facilitate student service activities. Targeted groups included Energy Express Ameri-Corps alumni, West Virginia 4-H All Stars, Bonner Scholars program alumni, Volunteer WV participants, alumni of WVU sororities and fraternities, members of the West Virginia state 4-H camp volunteer listserv, and WVU Campus Compact participants. It is not possible to accurately estimate the completion rate because each organization sent surveys to their own listservs and the final total number is unknown. However, 172 Energy Express alumni responded. This represents 13% of the total number of Energy Express alumni since the program began and for whom the team had forwarding emails. Respondents with no service experience in college were not expected to access the survey; however, if they did, they were instructed to exit the survey so results included only those who participated in college service activity.

The data, which was collected online, was entered into an Excel database and was re-entered into SPSS (statistics software) for further analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the population and frequency of answers on various questions. Pearson Chi Square and linear regression statistical tests were used to analyze the relationship of the demographic variables with the impact (life quality) variables.

These findings focus on the relationship between the length of time respondents said they served with one college organization and the following life decision variables: (a) making the decision, post college, to give service to others; (b) beliefs about whether or not they have made a difference in their community; (c) using skills learned in college to give service today; and (d) participating in a service activity during the past year that was not a part of their regular job assignment.

Limitations

The limitations of the study were that the researchers were unable to define the size of the sample due to the use of various listservs to reach a wide range of college graduates. In addition, the majority of respondents served for multiple months or more than a year, so there was a lower representation from those who served for shorter time periods. The population was also overwhelmingly white because of the predominant population of West Virginia. A more diverse population would increase the generalizability of the study results.

Respondents

Participants in the survey were former students who participated in service while in college. Targeted groups included Energy Express AmeriCorps alumni, 4-H All Stars, Bonner Scholars, Volunteer WV, the state's Commission for National and Community Service, and WVU's Center for Civic Engagement, Department of Social Work, Campus Compact, and Human Resources and Education alumni, sororities/fraternities, and state 4-H camp listserv. The largest group of respondents (62%) served with Energy Express.

There were 277 participants who completed the online survey during winter 2013. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 71, with a mean age of 30.96. The largest portion of respondents fell in the 21–29 age group. Of all participants, 80% were under the age of 38. On average, this is 15 years post-graduation for the typical college student. Ninety-six percent of the participants were white, which corresponds to the racial breakdown of 93.6% for the state (United States Census Bureau, 2015, retrieved from www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/pst045216/54,00). Participants completing the survey were predominantly female (81%), while 19% were males. Approximately 67% of respondents volunteered while in high school, and 70% do not have children younger than 18 years of age.

The majority of respondents (88.7%) earned a college degree. The level of educational completion ranged from 4.7% no certificate or degree, 3.6% with a certificate, 2.5% associate degree, 42.2% bachelor's degree, 36.5% master's degree, and 10% doctorate or professional degree.

Most respondents (90.1%) served for multiple months or one year or more, thus participating in long-term service opportunities. Only 10% served for a time period that was less than multiple months as shown in Table 1.

Findings

Results from the survey showed statistical correlations between the length of service given and future service-related behaviors and attitudes.

Decision to Serve People in Need

A Pearson Chi Square analysis found a significant relationship between the length of service for one organization while in college and the respondent's decision to serve people in need later in life (Value = 41.094, df = 16, and asymp. sig. (s-sided) = .0001). More than half of respondents who served for a period of more than one week but less than a month (55.6%) and for one year or more (53.3%) said that their college service experience had a great effect on their decision to serve those in need later in life. The number of respondents in each of these two groups was significantly more than expected, however, there were only five respondents in the group that said that they served more than one week but less than one month. There were 70 respondents in the group that served for one year or more. In contrast, as indicated in Table 2, only 25% of those who served for one day or less than a week with one organization and 21.4% of those who served for several days to one week with one organization, said their service experience had a great effect on serving those in need later in life. This was significantly less than expected (refer to Table 2).

An ANOVA was performed using "giving service to people in need" as the dependent variable and "longest time period you have served with one organization while in college or vocational school" as the independent or predictor variable. The results in indicate that there is a significant relationship between length of service and effect on later life decisions to serve others in need. As the length of service went up, the effect on giving service to people in need also went up. Nearly 5% of the increase in respondents serving people in need later in life can be attributed to the length of time

Table 1. The Longest Time period Served With an Organization

What is the longest period of time you served with an organization?		
	n	%
One day or less	4	1.5
Several days to one week	14	5.2
More than one week but less than a month	9	3.3
Multiple months	111	41.0
One year or more	131	49.1
Total	269	100.0

Table 2. Relationship of the Effect of Service on Later Life
Decisions to Serve People in Need and Length of Service in College

Those who said	Served one day or less		Served several days to one week		Served more than one week but less than one month		Served for multiple months		Served for one year or more at one time		Totals	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
No effect	0	0.0	1	7.1	0	0.0	7	6.3	2	1.50	10	100
Slight effect	1	25.0	2	14.3	0	0.0	5	4.5	1	.08	0	100
Moderate effect	2	50.0	0	0.0	1	11.1	23	20.7	12	9.20	38	100
Good effect	0	0.0	8	57.1	3	33.3	39	35.1	46	35.10	96	100
Great effect	1	25.0	3	21.4	5	55.6	37	33.3	70	53.40	113	100
Totals	4	100.0	14	100.0	9	100.0	111	100.0	131	100.0	269	100

they served with one organization while in college. This finding (refer to Table 2) is significant (p<.02).

Belief That I Can Make a Difference

An ANOVA was performed using the statement "I can make a difference" as the dependent variable and "longest time period you have served with one organization while in college or vocational school" as the independent or predictor variable. As the length of college service increased, the more likely respondents were to strongly agree that "they can make a difference in their community." As shown in Table 4, nearly 2% (1.6%) of the reason respondents agree that they can make a difference in their community can be attributed to longer periods of service. This finding is significant (p=<.05).

Participation in Service That Is Not a Part of One's Regular Job Assignment

An ANOVA was performed using answers to the question "Have you participated in service in the past year that is not a part of your regular job assignment?" as the dependent variable and "longest time period you have served with one organization while in college or vocational school" as the independent or predictor variable. As the length of college service increased, the more likely respondents were to say that they currently participate in service that is not a part of their regular job assignment. As shown in Table 5, nearly two percent (1.9 percent) of the reason that respondents say they currently participate in service activities that are not a part of their regular job assignment can be attributed to longer periods of service. This finding (Table 5) is significant (p=<.02).

Model for Predicting the Length of Time of a Respondent's Service Activity in College

A multivariate regression analysis was conducted with the length of time a respondent spent in a service activity with one organization as the dependent variable. The three predictor or independent variables included: (a) whether or not the respondent participated in a community service activity in the past year that was not part of the respondent's regular job assignment, (b) how strongly a respondent disagreed or agreed with the statement "I can make a difference in my community," and (c) the strength of the effect that the respondent said his or her service in college or vocational school had or will have on his or her choice to give service to people in need. Increased length of service activity in

Table 3. Analysis of Variance for the Longest Period of Served at One Organization While in College and Believe That I Can Make a Difference

	DF	F	MS	p
Independent variable: Later life decision to serve others in need	1	14.244	14.011	.000
Residual	267	.984	.267	
Total	268			
Dependent variable: Longest period served at one organization while in college				

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.225[a]	.051	.047	.992

Table 4. Analysis of Variance for Longest Period Served at One Organization While in College With Decision to Serve Others in Need

	DF	F	MS	p
Independent variable: Belief that I can make a difference	1	5.259	2.975	.023
Residual	269		.758	
Total	270			
Dependent variable: Longest period served at one organization while in college				

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.138^a	.019	.016	.87079

Table 5. Analysis of Variance for Longest Period Served at One Organization While in College and Participation in Service That Is Not a Part of Their Regular Assignment

		DF	F	MS	p
Participation in service that is not part of the regular job assignment	in	1	6.289	.922	.023
Residual		267		.741	
Total		268			
Dependent variable: Longest period served at one organization while in college					

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.152_a	.023	.019	.86081

Table 6. The Length of Time Served With One Organization While in College and three Predictor Variables

	B	SE B	β
Participation in community service activity in the past year that was not part of a regular job assignment	.250	.135	.111*
Strength of agreement with I can make a difference in my community	.125	.069	.110*
Strength of effect of service in college or vocational giving service to people in need.	.171	.051	.200***
Dependent variable: Longest period at one organization while in college			

*p <.10
***p <.02

Discussion of Findings

Findings from this study contribute to the literature on the relationship of duration of service on the continuing effects of service in college. Most studies have measured benefits of service either immediately after the service activity or right after college graduation. This study measured effects on former college volunteers post-graduation ranging in age from 21 to 71 years. Overall, the study affirms that the benefits of participating in college service last over an individual's lifetime. Furthermore, the longer a person serves with one organization, the more likely the act of service will positively influence his or her life. Findings showed a positive correlation between length of service given to one organization and the following factors:

1. An attitude that service is a meaningful part of one's life.

The results showed that those who served for a longer period of time in one organization were more likely to say that the service had a great effect on their decision later in life to serve people in need. This life value affects their personal view of themselves. Youniss and Yates (1997) found that several years after completing a high school service-learning course, students continue to

college for one organization resulted in more positive responses for each of these three variables. Together, these variables predicted (Table 6) 7% of the model (R square = .084; Adjusted R Square = .070).

identify the course as "clear landmark" in the development of their identity. A meta-analysis (Conway et al., 2009) found that service learning does tend to produce positive changes in academic, personal, social, and citizenship outcomes. There is additional evidence that personal outcomes change as a result of service (Billig, 2002; Eyler, 2000; Yates & Youniss, 1996).

Findings from a qualitative study based on intensive interviews suggested that the care for others nurtured during the service was an enduring and integral part of an individual's construction of identity (Jones & Abe, 2004). Researchers found that the integration of this capacity into participants' sense of self was evident as they consistently discussed the importance of service to others. This act of giving service heightened their desire to serve those in need. Astin and Sax (1998) found that the "habit" of volunteering persists over a relatively long period of time. The short-term effects of volunteer service participation during the undergraduate years persist beyond college and are not simply short-term artifacts. The positive attitude developed toward service results in additional service time later in life. The findings discussed in this article also showed a positive correlation consistent with the results from previous studies.

2. A belief that he or she can make a difference in one's community.

The results of this study indicate that a longer service duration affects an individual's belief that he or she can make a difference in their community. This belief is a form of personal-efficacy, also known as self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) defines self-efficacy as people's beliefs in their ability to influence events that affect their lives. Those with a tenacious self-efficacy are likely to change realities for more positive outcomes. One's sense of self-efficacy can play a major role in how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges and is at the center of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. A study that investigated students' commitment to future community involvement, efficacy, and empowerment found that self-efficacy fully mediates the relationship between one program characteristic, total hours of service, and students' commitment to future civic involvement (Knapp, et al., 2010).

Being a volunteer during college is associated with a greater sense of empowerment in the years after college (Astin & Sax, 1998). Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee (2000) also noted that the students gained a "sense of empowerment that they can have an impact" through their involvement in the community. Results from the Knapp, et al., (2010)

study suggest that the enhancement of students' social empowerment is even more important than enhancing students' self-efficacy in bringing about high levels of commitment to future civic engagement. Analysis of the findings from the Knapp study revealed that higher levels of commitment to be engaged are mediated by students' experiences of social empowerment. This feeling of empowerment is often coupled with a heightened sense of civic responsibility (Astin, et al., 2000). A sense of empowerment undergirds the belief that one can make a difference in one's community.

3. A lifestyle of continuous service to the community.

Recent literature shows evidence that the length of service positively affects a person's likelihood to perform community service later in life, including political involvement (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Denson, Vogelgesang, & Saenz, 2005). One study showed that the number of weeks and total hours that students volunteered were both related to high levels of commitment to later community involvement (Knapp, et al., 2010). The study discussed in this article reinforces those findings, not just with current college students, but with individuals who completed their college service activities years ago. This study found that as the length of college service increased, the more likely they were to report current participation in service unrelated to their regular job assignment. These findings are similar to the Astin and Sax (1999) study, which showed that both the number of weeks and total hours that students volunteered related to high levels of commitment to later community involvement.

Recommendations for Practice

Length of service commitments in college can have both a personal impact, as well as an impact with the community. There is evidence that a longer service commitment of multiple months and beyond can be a life-changing experience that influences future decisions. The study concurs with the recommendation that "it is important to extend students' service time so that they accumulate more and deeper experiences of working with and for others" (Knapp, et al., 2010). This ultimately strengthens the fabric of local communities, because participants also develop a loyalty to the service provider and to clients. The findings also support the concept of intentionally mentoring students to choose longer and more in-depth service opportunities.

As an example, the Energy Express developed and implemented by the researchers offers a longer

service commitment of eight weeks for AmeriCorps members. Because these Energy Express Ameri-Corps members participate in service for more than two months, they are more likely to give service later in life. Service with Energy Express can influence both the individual's attitude toward service and future service given with local communities.

Length and quality of contact by the service organization with the volunteers during their college years and after they leave college, may have an impact on their attitudes toward service and participation in service later in life. Although this was not studied, Energy Express program records show that one-third to one-half of the volunteers return each year. A volunteer listserv is maintained to send messages to former volunteers to cement relationships and reinforce loyalty. Organizations may benefit from keeping in touch with volunteers, offering new opportunities to serve, and giving them opportunities to serve once they have graduated. Service-learning efforts that focus on building relationships encourage students to come back and maintain contact.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several topics where further research would be beneficial including:

- What are the benefits of including reflection activities in long-term service activities in college?
- Do the numbers and types of service activities make a difference in long-term benefits?
- Does the consistency of type and supervision of service activities over the course of a student's college years make a difference in long-term benefits to the student and the community?
- Are college volunteers more or less involved in engaging their own children in service?
- Do the amount and quality of contact by service providers with student volunteers during and after college have an effect on the value former college volunteers place on service over their lifetimes?

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