

Post-Graduation Service and Civic Outcomes for High Financial Need Students of a Multi-Campus, Co-Curricular Service-Learning College Program

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Abstract

High financial need Bonner scholarship alumni, who had been engaged in four years of co-curricular service and reflection experiences, were surveyed six years after graduation. Survey questions drawn from UCLA's Life After College Survey allowed comparison with three national groups. All Bonner service-learning program graduates were still doing community service six years after graduation compared to approximately two-thirds of each comparison group. Alumni were more also likely than comparison groups to be civically engaged, particularly in activities requiring dialogue. The importance of sustained dialogue across boundaries of perceived difference is discussed.

The contribution of co-curricular and curricular service-learning to increasing the number of engaged citizens in the United States is relatively unexplored. Much of the available research on college-level service-learning has explored its effect on a variety of student outcomes for academic service-learning during the college years in a single course, and there are at least two large, multi-campus studies of curricular service-learning (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000; Eyer &

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We are grateful for support this study from the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis' Civic Service Research Grant sponsored by the Ford Foundation project and from the Bonner Foundation; for research assistance from Melissa Arlin; and for the assistance of The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.

Giles, 1999). While colleges may include in their mission statements a commitment to develop responsible citizens, little is known about the best use of resources or the best program designs to accomplish this goal.

The lead researcher, C. Keen, has been involved for more than ten years surveying participants of a program on 25 campuses—the Bonner Scholars Program (BSP)—which is designed to promote civic development of financially-needy college students. Studies of changes during Scholars' four college years are reported elsewhere (Hoy & Meisel, 2008; Keen & Hall, 2008). Ten of the 23 colleges hosting Bonner Scholar Programs were also part of the Life After College study (Vogelgesang & Astin 2005), sponsored by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. The Bonner Scholar Alumni Survey (BSAS), which drew heavily on the Life After College survey, was administered to alumni Scholars from those 10 campuses, allowing comparison with Life After College survey results from other graduates from the 10 campuses, other liberal arts colleges, and a larger national sample.

The research question explored in this study was the following: Compared to other college graduates, is there a difference in BSAS respondents' engagement in service and civic activities six years after graduation? Compared were graduates of the BSP's four-year service-learning program on 10 campuses to each of three other groups: all graduates of the same 10 campuses, graduates of similar liberal arts colleges, and a national sample of college graduates.

The tendency in the field is to use the phrase “service-learning” and assume the reference is to “academic service-learning.” In contrast, Bonner Scholars were involved with a program that drew them into service and reflection within a non-credit environment which was often integrated with their academic efforts. The terms *service-learning* and *civic engagement* have recently been used interchangeably in the field, particularly in discussions where the concept of civic involvement goes beyond the narrow definition of voting (Keen & Keen, 2004; Long, 2002). A book resulting from the Political Engagement Project draws the terms together in a meaningful way (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrich, & Corngold, 2007). The BSP lists civic engagement as one of its seven “common commitments” and defines civic engagement as intentional participation in the democratic process, public policy, and direct service (Keen & Keen, 2002). The BSP's co-curricular service-learning design fits well within the construct of civic service. Students' service is voluntary, remunerated, organized, hosted by partnering institutions, focused on both the server and the served, and aimed toward improving societal conditions, while involving significant investment of time (McBride, Sherraden, Lombe, & Young, 2007, pp. 4-9).

Yearly, the BSP funds 1,500 Scholars, almost all traditionally-aged college students and engages them in a four-year program that requires service while offering extensive training and support. Ten to twenty students are selected yearly on each BSP campus and are required to complete a minimum of 10 hours of service, training, and reflection each week. The percent of racially diverse Scholars is at least twice that of the student bodies on each campus. Ninety percent of Scholars make a contribution to their annual tuition below \$4,500, or about one-sixth of the typical annual cost of a liberal arts education in the United States. (The financial need of Bonner Scholars does not,

however, always equate to socio-economic class status. The majority of Scholars' parents had at least some college education: 64% of their mothers and 60% of their fathers.) Reflection, retreats, classes, participatory meetings, coaching, and informal dialogue are intended to help students make sense of their experiences crossing boundaries of perceived difference, and ultimately to develop critical, systemic understanding of the world anchored in compassionate approaches to human need. In addition, the program provides financial support for two to three full-time service experiences for at least seven weeks in summer or during co-op terms, including international service. By graduation, each Bonner Scholar has served at least 1,680 hours. The BSP's best practices and developmental model (Hoy, 2006; Hoy & Meisel, 2008) align well with other models of developmental outcomes and best practices of higher education (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Keeling, 2004; Pascarella, Wolniak, Cruce, & Blaich, 2004; Astin et al., 2000; Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

The president of the Bonner Foundation wrote of the BSP,

First and foremost, the Bonner Scholars Program is about access. Almost all students in the program have demonstrated considerable financial need. The program is designed to support students who want to make a significant commitment to community service and connect service activity to their academic experience. Rather than have the service activity oriented toward an individual student, the Bonner Program puts the community back into community service as students move together in their service journey. (Meisel, 2006, p. 2)

Summaries of the annual program survey of the BSP indicate that the program is probably as effective an incubator for the formation of sustainable adult commitments as is likely to be found (Keen & Keen, 2002). The BSP is now more than 17 years old, and its program design has been well honed. No previous study has been completed on alumni of the program.

Guiding Framework for this Study

The lead researcher's interest in the capacity of college experiences to foster students' life-long commitments to ameliorate human and environmental problems stems from analysis of interviews with 100 people. Interviews were conducted to understand the formative experiences of persons with sustained commitments to working on behalf of the common good in an age of diversity, ambiguity, and complexity (Daloz, C. Keen, J. Keen, & Parks, 1996). All 100 interviewees spoke of enlarging encounters with *otherness*, moments in their lives at which some person or group that had previously been an external *he, she, or they* came to be included in a newly reframed sense of *we*. These encounters, enabled most often by travel, shared work or study, military service, or community service, were always rich in meaningful dialogue. The perceived differences included but were not limited to ethnicity, *race*, religion, culture, physical ability, and social class. The developmental power of dialogue and reflection across thresholds of difference identified in the lead researcher's co-authored book, *Common Fire*, has

become a fruitful theoretical lens for examining educational programs, including service-learning. The potential of the BSP to support lifelong service commitments drew two of the four *Common Fire* researchers into working with the Bonner Foundation more than 10 years ago. In fact, early evaluations of the Bonner Program found that multiple programmatic opportunities for dialogue across thresholds of difference were its most valuable component (C. Keen & J. Keen, 2002).

Literature Review

Alumni Studies

While the number of available studies on the impact of college-level service-learning activities in the years after graduation is small, the studies support service-learning programs as a vehicle for carrying out the civic engagement mission embraced by many colleges and universities. A phone survey of alumni (n=491) who had graduated between two and nine years earlier from a religiously-affiliated liberal arts college found that participation in both service-learning and general community service predicted involvement in community service and service-related careers (Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005). A survey of alumni of 31 colleges belonging to the Appalachian College Association found that the strongest effect of alumni participation in service activities came from participation in college activities. Respondents' average age was 40, so most of them had graduated in an era when service-learning courses were not readily available (Johnson, 2004). Using the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) and examining reported behavior eight years after high school graduation, Hart, Donnelly, Youniss and Atkins (2007) found that community service, both required and voluntary, and extracurricular participation during high school predicted both adult volunteering and adult voting. Also using the NELS, Planty, Bozick and Reginer (2007) found from a sample of almost 10,000 high school graduates that those whose service had been voluntary rather than required were more likely to be doing community service eight years after high school graduation. Service engagement dipped for both groups two years after high school, but increased in their mid-twenties. Finally, a study comparing traditional program graduates to medical, nursing and public health graduates who participated in a rural Community Partnerships Program found the self-selected participants in the rural health program sustained their interest and engagement in rural health practice (Florence, Goodrow, Wachs, Grover, & Oliver, 2007).

Off-campus engagements by financially needy students

Time-consuming service and leadership opportunities are often out of reach for academically able students of high financial need. Marks and Jones (2004) found that financially needy college students were the most likely group of students to stop doing service they had sustained during high school. Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) review of the literature on the effect of work during college found little relationship between work and cognitive development, suggesting that requiring off-campus service work does and will not detract from desired student outcomes (pp. 196-197). One study of four-year colleges controlled for critical thinking upon entering college and found that 15-20 hours

of work per week enhanced critical thinking scores at the end of the third year (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998). Under certain circumstances, work can contribute to graduation rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 415). A recent study found that college students who worked were more likely than college students who did not work to be interested in politics, read newspapers, talk with friends, and engage or practice civic skills (Jarvis, Montoya, & Mulvoy, 2005).

Requiring or Remunerating Service

Others have argued that *requiring* service mutes the desired outcomes of service-learning. Marks and Jones (2004, p. 307) noted that the episodic service that is required of many high school students for graduation may result in increased rates of service in college but may undermine long term participation. They concluded that encouraging students to do service would be more effective than requiring it. In particular they found that “co-curricular or extra-curricular membership supported maintaining service involvement in college” (p. 333). Melchior and Bailis (2002) also expressed concern about community service behavior in high school dissipating without encouragement. In fact, a sense of obligation to do service during college may have a powerful positive effect, as suggested by Hu’s (2008) longitudinal study of recipients of a Gates Millennium Scholarship. Recipients, all academically talented, high financial need students like the Bonner Scholars, were more likely to have strong democratic values and be civically engaged after college, when compared to a matched sample.

Methods

The BSAS was conducted to determine if BSP alumni were still doing service and were civically engaged six years after graduation. Of the 23 campuses involved a related longitudinal study of the impact of the BSP during the college years (Keen & Hall, 2008), 10 of those campuses had also participated in UCLA’s 2004 Life After College Study (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2005). Of the 124 BSP alumni who graduated in 1999 from those 10 campuses, 41 Bonner Scholars were reached (33% response rate of 29 women and 12 men) with the help of the college alumni offices, directors of service offices, parents, and internet searches. The 41 BSP alumni survey participants were from the following ten colleges: Berea College, DePauw College, Earlham College, Emory and Henry College, Hood College, Ferrum College, Morehouse College, Spelman College, University of Richmond, and Waynesburg College.

BSAS questions were chosen from UCLA’s Life After College Survey (2005) so that responses of the 41 Bonner alumni could be compared to three UCLA survey groupings: (1) participants on 10 Bonner campuses ($n = 393$); (2) participants from 20 comparable liberal arts campuses ($n = 766$); and (3) all participants in the Life After College weighted sample ($n = 8,474$). Availability of data resulted in 1998 BSP graduates’ responses being compared to 1999 graduates in the other three samples. Given the variation in sample sizes, z-tests were calculated to find if differences between BSAS respondents and each of three comparison groups were statistically significant ($p \leq .05$). Z-tests confirmed the findings discussed below and presented in Tables 1-4.

Findings

One hundred percent of the 41 Bonner Scholar Alumni Survey respondents were still involved in community service activity six years after graduation. In comparison, data from the Life After College Study suggests that only 66% of graduates from the same 10 colleges which Bonner alumni had graduated were still doing service, as were 69% of graduates of 20 comparable liberal arts colleges and 68% of the national sample (see Table 1).

BSAS respondents were also more civically involved than alumni in three comparison groups. Bonner alumni more often responded with “frequently” or “occasionally” on seven of nine questions regarding civic activities (see Table 2) and all nine questions regarding expressing opinions on political issues (see Table 3) than did comparison groups. The greatest differences were BSAS respondents’ reports of signing petitions, using on-line communication to raise others’ awareness about social and political issues, playing a leadership role in the community, working with others to solve community problems, and displaying campaign materials.

Similar to other studies that focus on students who do service, BSAS respondents were somewhat less likely to vote in national elections or donate to a political campaign than graduates of liberal arts colleges, although donating was low for both groups (Long, 2002). Bonner Scholars were however more likely to vote than all other participants in the national Life After College survey. BSAS respondents were also more likely to be working in the non-profit sector and to be satisfied with the opportunity to contribute to society through their job than were alumni in the three comparison groups (see Table 1).

When asked which 15 college activities strongly affected their preparation for life after college, BSAS respondents were more strongly affected by engagement in community service and activity in religious organizations, compared to the other three alumni groups. Community service and participation in the BSP were the two aspects of college life to which the alumni Scholars attributed the strongest contribution to their life after college (see Table 4). Scholars and other liberal arts college graduates were equally affected by interaction with faculty and mentors, though Scholars were marginally more affected by mentors than the other two comparison groups. The four tables in this article merit careful study, as other notable findings are evident.

Limitations

The main limitation of the study is the self-selection of these qualified students to apply for a Bonner Program scholarship 10 years earlier. Comparison of the 1998 Bonner graduates with 1999 graduates who participated in the Life After College study may have affected the results due to differences in the different cohorts. Failure to reach more than half of the alumni group may have been affected by variables that also may affect civic engagement, such as greater transiency resulting in less connection with communities and hence less engagement in service and civic activities.

Discussion

These data do not support the conjecture that students who are expected to serve and are financially supported to do so will stop doing service once expectations are fulfilled and financial support ends. Though the BSP participants are self-selected into the program as college freshmen, these alumni survey results cannot easily be explained away by pre-college characteristics of Bonner Scholars. Pascarella et al. (2004) found that students from liberal arts colleges, compared to those from research and regional universities, were more likely to report experiencing best practices, regardless of their pre-college characteristics. The Bonner Scholars are more likely to have experienced these “best practices” and benefitted from them, regardless of pre-existing inclination to do community service. Pascarella et al. urged colleges to seek ways to continue the developmental supports offered during the first year of college, such as those supports provided by the BSP (p. 72). Keen and Hall (2008) found that significant developmental influences of the BSP could be explained by three best practices: the program’s intensity and duration, skills Scholars gained in dialoguing across perceived boundaries of difference, and attendance at a more diverse college.

Hart et al. (2007) pointed out the developmental importance of finding dialogue partners with whom one can engage in talking about service, community needs, and policy implications. The BSP experience confirms research findings regarding the power of such dialogue opportunities, particularly when dialogue partners include diverse peers with whom one must sustain conversation during the college years, as well as people whom they serve and who supervise their service (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Hurtado, 2005; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). The Bonner alumni survey results suggest that students who are embedded in service and dialogue across lines of perceived difference not only value dialogue and reflection with peers, mentors, and faculty, but also are drawn to civic involvement that is more dialogical than simply voting, such as making online contact with peers and family regarding social and political issues, doing community projects with others, and working with others in a leadership role to improve the community.

Monetary rewards in the form of a scholarship do not seem to diminish either Bonner Scholar alumni’s service or their civic involvement six years after graduation. McBride, Pritzker, Daftary, and Tang (2004) also suggested that financial rewards do not obviate the benefits of service-learning, and Hu (2008) suggested that scholarships do not diminish civic engagement. Festinger (1957) suggested that we come to value and find meaning in what we do, particularly when the financial rewards are small, as in the case of the Bonner scholarships. Without the meaning, it would be too hard to repeat the action daily. Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory suggested that students who are surrounded by peers, staff, faculty, and activities that embrace the values of service and civic engagement would indeed be more likely to continue to serve.

The BSP is not alone using service scholarships and financial rewards as a means of supporting and engaging students. Campus Compact (2007) reported that service awards to students are the most often used mechanism for supporting student involvement in service, with 71% of surveyed institutions awarding service involvement,

an increase from 48% in 2000. Sixty-seven percent of institutions considered service in awarding scholarships. Many of these awards may be merit awards, irrespective of need. Another Campus Compact publication recently advocated for service scholarships as a powerful tool for developing students (Zlotkowski, Longo, & Williams, 2006).

Further research should be done on the long term value of scholarships, including the U.S. Federal Work-Study Program funds that are tied to a requirement for service, and on the role of required reflection and sustained support for service across the college years. Studies of the impact of service-learning should include co-curricular service-programs as well as the value of engaging across boundaries of perceived difference as potentially crucial aspects of the developmental value of service-learning.

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Table 1

Percentage of Alumni by Service Involvement and Career Choice in Public and Nonprofit Sectors

	'99 Bonner Scholar alums from 10 campuses (n = 41) %	'98 alums from 10 Bonner campuses (n = 393) %	'98 alums from 20 comparable liberal arts colleges (n = 766) %	'98 alumni from national sample (n = 8,474) %
Volunteering at all	100	66	69	68
Volunteering 3+ hours a week	33	not measured	not measured	not measured
Satisfied with opportunity to contribute to society through job (very satisfied or satisfied)	82	66	62	62
Current job in nonprofit sector	33	16	15	12

Table 2

Percentage of Alumni Who Engaged in Civic Activities in Six Years Since Graduation

	'99 Bonner Scholar alums from 10 campuses (n = 41) %	'98 alums from 10 Bonner campuses (n = 393) %	'98 alums from 20 comparable liberal arts colleges (n = 766) %	'98 alumni from national sample (n = 8,474) %
Discussed community issues	78	75	77	66
Used on-line communication with family or friends to raise awareness about social and political issues	69	42	41	58
Voted in national election occasionally or frequently	66	75	77	43
Donated money to a religious org.	58	42	46	43
Donated to an educational org.	48	38	43	34
Played leadership role in improving the community	46	22	17	13
Worked with others to solve a problem in the community where you live	45	16	16	13
Donated professional services on a "pro bono" basis	38	26	24	19
Donated money to a political campaign	8	13	17	10

Table 3

Percentage of Alumni who Expressed an Opinion about Community Political Issues in the Six Years since College

	'99 Bonner Scholar alums from 10 campuses (n = 41) %	'98 alums from 10 Bonner campuses (n = 393) %	'98 alums from 20 comparable liberal arts colleges (n = 766) %	'98 alumni from national sample (n = 8,474) %
Signed a written or email petition	50	31	32	22
Bought product because of social/political values of company	50	35	40	29
Didn't buy product because of values of company	48	46	33	36
Wore campaign button, sticker or car, or sign in front of home to support issue, cause or candidate	28	16	18	12
Gave opinion/contacted/visited pub. Official	20	15	16	10
Worked with a political group or official	18	9	11	6
Contacted newspaper or magazine	13	5	4	2
Worked door-to-door for candidate or cause	10	3	4	1
Called a radio or TV talk show	8	1	1	1

Table 4

Percentage of Alumni Indicating a Strong Impact of Campus Activities on Preparation for Life After College

	'99 Bonner Scholar alums from 10 campuses (n = 41) %	'98 alums from 10 Bonner campuses (n = 393) %	'98 alums from 20 comparable liberal arts colleges (n = 766) %	'98 alumni from national sample (n = 8,474) %
Community service	57	19	14	13
Living away from home	55	63	62	62
Overall participation in the BSP	52	-	-	-
Interaction with faculty	46	34	37	24
Internships	43	34	28	31
Friendships	43	62	59	43
Living on campus	39	34	38	32
Employment	39	25	23	31
Mentors	39	26	22	20
College course work	36	29	27	23
Religious organizations	27	13	17	15
Study abroad	21	24	22	13
Student clubs	16	12	14	13
Fraternities/sororities	7	12	15	10
Student government	5	3	5	4
Athletics	0	12	13	11