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Service-Learning and Volunteering: Does the Course Matter?

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Service-Learning and Volunteering: Does the Course Matter?

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Abstract: One of the greatest challenges facing third-sector organizations is attracting and retaining sufficient, qualified volunteers to develop and deliver their programs. Often, college-educated individuals are uniquely suited for this volunteer role. Many colleges and universities are using Service-Learning (S-L) as a vehicle to educate students on the importance of social and community issues. In 2006, Campus Compact member university students contributed \$7.1 billion, using the Independent Sector's annual value of \$18.77 per hour, with 91% of Campus Compact member universities offering some Service-Learning courses. Some nonprofit scholars argue that Service-Learning at the collegiate level will increase the extent of volunteering by these students after graduation (see for example Astin, Sax and Avalos 1999). The purpose of this paper is to compare the post-graduate volunteer experiences of students who completed two different available Service-Learning classes on two dimensions: the level of post-graduate volunteering and the perceived value of post-graduate volunteering.

BACKGROUND ON SERVICE-LEARNING

“Service-Learning asserts that the practical experience of service in the community, undertaken toward improving the common good and tied to academic learning, provides an improved learning opportunity to students” (Kellogg 1999, pg. 4). The term Service-Learning is used to describe an educational approach that combines community service projects with academic study. Students partake in volunteerism projects within a community to reinforce principles and theories taught in classrooms through active participation. The Service-Learning projects are carefully chosen and organized in order to enhance and apply specific concepts that relate to students’ areas of study.

The reported benefits of Service-Learning opportunities are significant. In addition to promoting the skills and principles taught in classrooms, Service-Learning serves to improve relationships among students, the school and the community (Skinner & Chapman 1999). Furthermore, community service projects serve to encourage teamwork, develop leadership skills, enhance critical thinking skills, and broaden student awareness of societal needs and problems (Rama et al. 2000).

In recent years, Service-Learning has become a widely accepted and utilized method to supplement the higher learning experience. The U.S. Department of Education (Skinner & Chapman 1999) reported that 83% of public high schools have community service activities and programs for students that are organized by school officials. By 2007, Learn and Serve America reported that K-12 grants supported 1,348 organizations (Corporation for National and Community Service 2007). In response, university officials and professors recognized the interest and prior experience that undergraduate students possess in Service-Learning. Thus, Service-Learning opportunities are increasingly available to university students to actively engage them in programs that support the principles being taught, while at the same time, improving the community.

Already, internships, cooperative learning programs, and field experiences are widely recognized as ways in which students can gain practical experience in their fields of study. Service-Learning shares many attributes of these active learning approaches, in addition to eliminating several of their key detriments. Commonalities of Service-Learning and internships, for example, include placement activities, orientation and training, debriefing and perhaps critical reflection, and learning through experience. However, while internships are typically only offered to advanced undergraduates or

graduate students, Service-Learning opportunities are abundant and can consequently be offered to students at nearly all skill levels (Furco 1996).

In summarizing the definition and utility of Service-Learning, it is useful to look to Kellogg's 1999 description. "Service-Learning is not merely volunteering in the community, but rather an opportunity for the student to integrate his or her academic knowledge with the knowledge that comes from practice." (p. 8) We note that Steiner and Watson (2006) provide a particularly useful definition for our purposes. Service-Learning includes three characteristics of experiential learning (hands-on community encounter, tie to curriculum, required reflection) and two differentiators (community project, and attempt to foster civic values or community participation).

At the collegiate level, Service-Learning can be defined as a form of "experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby & Associates 1996, p.5). A growing number of private and public colleges and universities are offering S-L classes to their students and many (e.g. Defiance College) are mandating participation in a S-L project as a graduation requirement (Crews 2002; Jacoby & Associates 2003; Klink & Athaide 2004; Campus Compact 2006).

Although the impetus for S-L is generally attributed to the liberal arts, business educators have taken a leadership role in encouraging Service-Learning participation among their students (Fisher & Ackerman, 1998; Gujarathi & McQuade 2002; Klink & Athaide 2004). When third-sector organizations tap in to the Service-Learning programs of colleges and universities, it usually results in a win-win situation for all parties (Godfrey, Iles & Berry 2005; McIntyre, Webb, & Hite 2005). The students benefit from a different perspective, skill development and an increased understanding of community needs, while nonprofit organizations benefit from the insights and skills of the students.

In a 1998 paper, Giles and Eyler set out the top ten unanswered questions in Service-Learning research. Number Nine on this list asked "What impact does Service-Learning have on students' citizenship roles, community service, and other forms of social participation in later life?" (p. 65). While there is some evidence that service is associated with civic involvement, such research is generally limited (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Giles & Eyler 1994). Olney and Grande (1995) developed a scale to measure social responsibility development in undergraduates that incorporated both time spent and duration of service. A longer term study by Astin, Sax and Avalos (1999) found that the short-term effects of volunteer service participation during undergraduate years do persist beyond college. Kahne, Westhiemer and Rogers (2000) noted that participating students' 'sense of civic responsibility' was enhanced through service-learning, but does that translate into civic action later? Perry and Thomson (2004) similarly reported that the short-term nature of Service-Learning courses often precludes many of the positive outcomes that extended community service involvement provides. Evidence of a link between Service-Learning and volunteering in later life remains sparse.

The purpose of this paper is to add to this limited research by exploring effects of two different Service-Learning courses on graduates' propensity to volunteer after graduation and on the perceived quality of the volunteers' contribution to the nonprofit organization.

SERVICE-LEARNING EXPERIENCES: TWO COURSES AT A BUSINESS COLLEGE

Service-Learning in Economics

The choice to incorporate Service-Learning into the Money and Banking course at the College of Business Administration was based on a number of factors. In addition to faculty interest in experiential pedagogies, the university was investigating Service-Learning on campus partly because The Higher Learning Commission's reaccreditation visit was approaching. Second, the College of Business

Administration was trying to meet suggestions of some advisory executive focus groups. These factors diminished the usual complications of adopting this more demanding pedagogy. Third, Service-Learning offers an active technique for learning economic theory through real-world experience.

In Money and Banking, an upper level required or elective economics course that applied economic principles, the professor explicitly tried to develop an understanding of the theory and practice of banking. The course aimed to equip students with skills that encouraged them to connect current economic conditions with relevant data. To meet specific learning objectives, the course made students well-informed so they could discuss financial aspects of the global economy in any forum.

Planned general learning outcomes included the development of critical and creative thinking skills, the ability to respond to change, exposure to real-world diversity, and a better understanding of classroom concepts through the experience of teaching and being taught. In addition, the course design intended the group-based nature of activities to promote teamwork and communication skills among the participants. These general outcomes addressed concerns of advisory focus groups that identified deficiencies in four key areas: (a) written and oral communication skills, (b) commitment and work ethic, (c) teamwork and team skills, and (d) cultural awareness and sensitivity to diversity.

Planned Service-Learning projects for the Money and Banking course (fall and spring 2001; spring 2002, 2003, and 2004) constituted 25% of the course grade. In 2001, the class's students offered tutorial assistance to children and financial planning basics to adult clients at a community service agency. During 2002-2004, they taught economics and finance fundamentals to an economics class at an area high school.

To ensure successful completion of hours and hold each student responsible for promised services, the client organization and the participants signed a contract detailing their service commitments. Also, students maintained and turned in a reflective-journal detailing their experiences.

Service-Learning in Management

Choosing Service-Learning for the Nonprofit Management course was easy. University program interest was strong in the first years of this new course, with a University VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) volunteer to help out. The ideas of the Business College's focus groups carried over to ease the adoption decision.

The primary purpose for the course was to train business undergraduates for future positions as community leaders (the college mission), when they would serve on nonprofit community organization boards. Because the students were informed that future service was a key learning goal, applying Service-Learning became an obvious step.

Nonprofit Management is an upper-level management elective course requiring students to apply understanding of management concepts to management challenges in the 'Third Sector'. The specific learning objectives of (a) understanding special management problems of nonprofit organizations, (b) gaining experience in this dynamic and important sector, and (c) preparing for future service as board members, link with general learning objectives of enhanced critical thinking, applying course concepts to serve a real nonprofit, adapting to change, building teamwork and communication skills, and raising awareness of diversity beyond campus.

Service projects for Nonprofit Management also counted for 25% of the total course grade, with reflective project logs earning another 12.5%. In 2001 and 2003, students in groups of 3-5 worked with members of nonprofit boards and their stakeholders to examine concerns, evaluate process, and prepare reports. In 2002, students partnered with the local nonprofit hospital to revise its new employee or volunteer orientation manual for with each student group having separate chapter responsibilities. In 2004, the instructor secured client agencies, and student groups negotiated their own project contracts.

Groups organized a campaign for a 'Friends of the Library' program; planned, researched, designed, developed, and published a Web page for a local county hospital; conducted a membership survey for the county YMCA; and participated in the annual fundraising and grant cycle as full members of the Kiwanis for 10 weeks. Students developed contracts with their clients and with each other, and peers evaluated individual participation. The instructor called for reflective journals and project logs at three intervals during the ten-week course.

As can be seen, students had very different experiences in each of these classes. From these different experiences we speculate that respondents will likely show different levels of post-graduate volunteering experience. Specifically, we speculate that students who completed the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course will likely volunteer more and perceive that their volunteer work is of greater value to the nonprofit organization than either students who had no Service-Learning course or those who completed the Money and Banking Service-Learning course. To test these speculations we developed two hypotheses.

HYPOTHESES

H1: Alumni who experience the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course experienced a higher level of future (post-graduate) volunteering than those who took no Service-Learning course or those who experienced the Money and Banking Service-Learning course.

H2: Alumni who experienced the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course and who volunteered after graduation perceive their volunteer work is of greater value to the nonprofit organization than those who volunteered after graduation and who took no Service-Learning course or those who experienced the Money and Banking Service-Learning course.

METHOD

Sample

The sample for our study was taken from the alumni database of graduates of the College of Business Administration of a Midwestern private university from 2001 through 2005. Two different S-L courses were offered as electives during this period; Money and Banking as an upper-level Economics elective and Nonprofit Management as an upper-level Management elective. During the period, the Money and Banking course was required for some students and a preferred elective choice among other students to meet the requirement for an upper-level economics course.

Procedure

Of the 332 College of Business Administration graduates during this period, 209 (63%) were identified as having valid email addresses. Each of these alumni was sent an email requesting their participation in a S-L research study and providing a link to a web-based survey. Respondents were assured that their individual responses would remain confidential and anonymous. Three weeks after the initial email, a reminder email was sent to the same alumni again requesting their participation. Surveys were completed by 91 of the alumni resulting in a 44% response rate. All of the returned surveys were useable. A response rate of 44% is lower than desired but is acceptable for exploratory survey research conducted with organizational representatives (Baruch 1999; Gruca and Schewe 1992). Notably, Baruch's (1999) meta-analysis of response rates found an average response rate of 36.1% (with a SD of 13.3) for survey research involving organizational representatives in the business sector. Since this was a web-based survey, comparison to response rates in similar surveys is appropriate. The response rate of 44% is much higher than the 24.6% rate reported by Sax, Gilmartin and Bryant (2003) for the web-only without

incentives portion of their survey and is in line with the 46.6% response rate reported by Johnson and Reips (2007) for the neutral power version of their web-based survey.

Measures

The level of volunteering after graduating was assessed with a single item. The item asked “To what extent have you participated in volunteer work since leaving the College of Business Administration?” The item was anchored with a four-point response scale ranging from 0 = “None” to 3 = “A Great Deal.”

The perceived value of post-graduate volunteering was assessed with a single item. The item asked “How valuable do you think your volunteer work is to the organization?” The item was anchored with a three-item scale ranging from 1 = “Not Valuable” to 3 = “Very Valuable.” There was also a “Not Applicable” choice for those who had no post-graduate volunteer service.

Analysis

The hypotheses were tested using analysis of variance (ANOVA). Analysis of variance is an accepted statistical procedure for determining whether the means of three or more populations are equal (Hanke & Reitsch 1994).

Responses were analyzed for four populations; those with no Service-Learning course, those who completed at least one Service-Learning course, those who completed the Money & Banking course, and those who completed the Nonprofit Management course. The survey was sent to all 2001 through 2005 graduates of the College of Business Administration with known email addresses. The 91 responses were generally evenly divided among the six graduating classes (Table 1). Respondents to the survey were 59.3% female and 40.7% male. Sixty point four percent (60.4%) of the respondents completed the money and banking Service-Learning course, 20.8% completed the nonprofit Service-Learning course and 18.7% did not complete a Service-Learning course. No respondents reported completing both courses.

TABLE 1
RESPONDENT PROFILE

	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	54	59.3%
Male	37	40.7%
Graduated		
2001	20	22.0%
2002	15	16.5%
2003	18	19.8%
2004	20	22.0%
2005	18	19.8%
Service-Learning		
Money & Banking	55	60.4%
Nonprofit Mgmt	19	20.8%
None	17	18.7%

Volunteering experience prior to entering college could be a confounding factor in our analysis. We asked respondents about their volunteering before entering college with responses anchored at 0= “None” to 3= “A great deal.” An analysis of variance on this data (Table 2) provided an F-value of 0.2436 (F-

critical = 2.6608) and a p-value of 0.8656. There was no significant difference in the volunteer experience prior to entering college among the four groups, those who took either Service-Learning course, those who took the nonprofit Service-Learning course, those who took the money and banking Service-Learning course and those who took no Service-Learning course.

TABLE 2
VOLUNTEERING EXPERIENCE PRIOR TO COLLEGE

Anova: Single Factor						
SUMMARY						
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance		
S L	74	86	1.162162	0.411699		
No SL	17	22	1.294118	0.720588		
M & B SL	55	63	1.145455	0.459933		
NP SL	19	23	1.210526	0.28655		
ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	0.325306	3	0.108435	0.243904	0.865578	2.660755
Within Groups	71.57772	161	0.444582			
Total	71.90303	164				

Our first hypothesis was that alumni who experience the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course experienced a higher level of future (post-graduate) volunteering. This hypothesis was tested with analysis of variance (Table 3). The results of the Analysis of Variance provide an F-value of 0.4029 (F-critical = 2.6608) and a p-value of 0.7511. The first hypothesis is not supported. There is no significant difference in the post-graduate volunteering level that can be attributed to students taking either Service-Learning course.

Our second hypothesis was that alumni who experienced the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course and who volunteered after graduation believe their volunteer work is of greater value to the nonprofit organization. We first used analysis of variance (Table 4) to test whether there was any significant difference between an of the groups, those who did not take a Service-Learning course, those who took the Money and Banking Service-Learning course and those who took the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course.

The results of the Analysis of Variance provide an F-value of 3.1659 (F-critical = 2.6608) and a p-value of 0.0261. There is a significant difference between at least two of the groups. Individual t-tests were performed (Table 5) to determine where the significant difference lay and if the difference was in the hypothesized direction. No significant difference was found between respondents with no Service-Learning and those with Service-Learning in general (t-statistic = 0.8625, t-critical = 1.6622, p-value = 0.1953). Similarly, no significant difference was found between respondents with no Service-Learning and those who reported completing the money and banking Service-Learning course (t-statistic = 0.1411, t-critical = 1.6669, p-value = 0.4441). There was a significant difference between respondents with no Service-Learning and those who completed the nonprofit Service-Learning course (t-statistic = 2.0801, t-

critical = 1.6909, p-value = 0.0556). There is also a significant difference between respondents who completed the Money and Banking Service-Learning Course and those who completed the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course (t-statistic = 2.9210, t-critical = 1.6669, p-value = 0.0023).

TABLE 3
LEVEL OF POST-GRADUATE VOLUNTEERING

Anova: Single Factor						
SUMMARY						
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance		
NO SL	17	20	1.176471	0.654412		
SL	74	83	1.121622	0.683636		
M&B SL	55	65	1.181818	0.670034		
NP SL	19	18	0.947368	0.719298		
ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	0.822092	3	0.274031	0.402894	0.751111	2.660755
Within Groups	109.5052	161	0.680156			
Total	110.3273	164				

TABLE 4
PERCEIVED VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING TO THE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

Anova: Single Factor						
SUMMARY						
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance		
SL	74	177	2.391892	0.81692		
NO SL	17	44	2.588235	0.257353		
M& B SL	55	141	2.563636	0.43569		
NP SL	19	36	1.894737	1.654971		
ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	6.906229	3	2.302076	3.165933*	0.026066*	2.660755
Within Groups	117.0695	161	0.72714			
Total	123.9758	164				

*Significant at $p \leq 0.05$

TABLE 5
T-TESTS ON VOLUNTEERING RESULTS

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances		
	NO SL	SL
Mean	2.588235	2.391892
Variance	0.257353	0.81692
observations	17	74
Pooled Variance	0.716323	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	89	
t Stat	0.862544	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.195353	
t Critical one-tail	1.662155	
	NO SL	M& B SL
Mean	2.588235	2.563636
Variance	0.257353	0.43569
Observations	17	55
Pooled Variance	0.394927	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	70	
t Stat	0.141058	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.444115	
t Critical one-tail	1.666914	
	NO SL	NP SL
Mean	2.588235	1.894737
Variance	0.257353	1.654971
Observations	17	19
Pooled Variance	0.997268	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	34	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.022561*	
t Critical one-tail	1.690924	
*Significant at $p \leq 0.05$		
	M& B SL	NP SL
Mean	2.563636364	1.894736842
Variance	0.435690236	1.65497076
Observations	55	19
Pooled Variance	0.740510367	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	72	
t Stat	2.92104064**	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.002328145**	
t Critical one-tail	1.666293697	
**Significant at $p \leq 0.01$		

The second hypothesis proposed that alumni who experienced the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course and who volunteered after graduation perceive their volunteer work is of greater value to the nonprofit. If this hypothesis is fully supported, the mean of the perceived value of volunteer work should be higher for those who completed the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course than for those who had no Service-Learning course and for those who completed the Money and Banking Service-Learning Course. This is not the case. The mean of the perceived value of volunteer work for those with no Service-Learning course was 2.5882, the mean for those who completed the Money and Banking Service-Learning course was 2.5636 and the mean for those who completed the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course was 1.895. While there is a difference in the perceived value of volunteer work between the pairs of groups, the difference is not in the hypothesized direction.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper is to add to the limited research on the effects of Service-Learning courses on the propensity to volunteer after graduation and the perceived quality of volunteers' contribution to the nonprofit organization. The results of this research offer some support to the findings of Astin, Sax and Avalos (1999) that the short-term effects of volunteer service participation during undergraduate years do persist beyond college. Even though we did not find that students who completed the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course while in college volunteered at a significantly higher rate than those who did not take a Service-Learning course or those students who completed the Money and Banking Service-Learning Course, our results likewise did not show a significant reduction in volunteering. Like Astin, Sax and Avalos (1999) our results do not provide a clear link between Service-Learning and volunteering later in life.

Steiner and Watson's (2006) definition of Service-learning includes three characteristics of experiential learning (hands-on community encounter, tie to curriculum, required reflection) and two differentiators (community project, and foster civic values or community participation). Our second hypothesis was aimed at the latter differentiator. While we did find a significant difference in the perceived value of their volunteering effort between those alumni who completed the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course, and those who completed no Service-Learning course or who completed the Money and Banking Service-Learning course, we anticipated that those alumni who completed the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning course would perceive the value of the volunteer service to be higher than those with no Service-Learning course or those who completed the Money and Banking Service-Learning Course. Results of our survey show the opposite. Alumni who completed the Nonprofit Management Service-Learning Course perceived the difference in the value of their post-graduate volunteer service to be significantly different, and lower, than those with no Service-Learning course.

There are several limitations to this study. First, the size of the sample is smaller than one would wish. While the response rate to the survey is within acceptable bounds, the initial population surveyed is small. Additionally, each of the hypothesized data elements was tested with a single item on the questionnaire. Further, there is a mixture of students who took their Service-Learning class as an elective in Management, a preferred elective in Economics and a required course in Economics. The difference between these courses and the type of Service-Learning experience deserves further exploration. Finally, all of the alumni surveyed were from the same institution. The study should be replicated across more schools, particularly those where Service-Learning is a primary distinguishing part of the undergraduate experience.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Even with its limitations, this study does provide some interesting results. The type of Service-Learning experience does make a difference. We hypothesized that the alumni who experienced working

with a nonprofit organization during their Service-Learning course would perceive the value of their post-graduate volunteering to be greater than those who either did not experience a Service-Learning course or those whose Service-Learning experience did not involve direct contact with a nonprofit organization. This was not the case. This brings us to the question of how do volunteers perceive the value of their volunteer work. On what basis do they value their volunteer experience? What consequences does this present for their continued involvement? How can nonprofit organizations respond to support these volunteers' motivation, involvement and commitment? This opens an interesting new avenue of research.

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