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Experiential Learning in Washington, D.C.: A Study of Student Motivations and Expectations

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Abstract:

Experiential learning offers students opportunities to learn in real-world settings outside the classroom. In political science, such experiences have been found to enhance knowledge of the political process, positively impact subsequent academic performance, and develop more robust understandings of civic values. While these research findings have led colleges and universities to increasingly mandate service-learning courses, many experiential learning opportunities such as internships and study abroad programs are voluntary and demand student initiative. The purpose of this paper is to explore why students choose to engage in such voluntary experiential opportunities. The research questions guiding this project ask: Why do students take the initiative to participate in voluntary experiential learning? What do they hope to gain through their participation? These questions are addressed through a grounded theory analysis of the application essays of sixteen Bryant University students who participated in a ten-day experiential learning program on the 2009 Presidential Inauguration at The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars. This analysis identifies and discusses five types of motivation that inspired these students to participate, which may help colleges and universities identify ways to persuade more students to embrace these valuable opportunities.

Key Words:

experiential learning, student motivation, student travel, study trips.

Introduction

Experiential learning offers students valuable opportunities to learn in real-world settings outside the classroom. In political science, experiences such as service-learning, internships, semesters abroad, and short-term study trips have been found to enhance knowledge of the political process, positively impact subsequent academic performance, and develop more robust understandings of civic values. At a more

personal level, these opportunities also impact the development of character, confidence, and independence, which occurs when students are able to learn about themselves by reflecting on their experiences in new and challenging situations. As research identifying these benefits has become more prominent, colleges and universities have increasingly embraced these opportunities in their curricula, most commonly through the mandating of service-learning courses.

George D. Kuh (2008) argues that colleges and universities should seek to increase student access to these experiential learning opportunities, which he identifies as “high impact educational practices,” by utilizing them in a more systematic ways. However, internships, semesters abroad, and short-term study trips represent experiential learning opportunities that are predominantly voluntary and therefore demand that students actively choose to take part. Therefore, it is important to ask: Why do students take the initiative to participate in voluntary experiential learning? What do they hope to gain through their participation? This project explores these questions by analyzing the application essays of sixteen students who participated in a Winter Session course on the 2009 Presidential Inauguration. This course offered a short-term experiential learning opportunity that took place both in-class at Bryant University in Smithfield, RI, and as a study trip to Washington, D.C., where students participated in a seminar and site-visit program organized by The Washington Center for Internships and Seminars. The aim of this research is to explore why students take the initiative to participate in experiential learning. Findings from this study may help colleges and universities identify ways to persuade more students to embrace these valuable opportunities.

This paper first offers an introduction to experiential learning and discusses student travel as a means to facilitate such learning. Next, it outlines how the Bryant University 2009 Presidential Inauguration course was organized. This is followed by a grounded theory analysis of student expectations for this experience, derived from their own application essays. This analysis identifies and discusses five types of motivation that inspired these students to participate, which I categorize as: (1) seizing a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity; (2) increasing knowledge and understanding of American politics; (3) becoming better citizens and/or more informed voters; (4) aiding future careers; and (5) learning outside the classroom. The paper concludes with a discussion of my findings regarding student motivations to participate in experiential learning.

Experiential Learning and Student Travel

In the context of higher education, experiential learning is a “philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully exchange with learners’ direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values” (Association for Experiential Education, 2007). This typically involves the integration of real-life experiences with traditional methods of instruction, and commonly takes the form of service-learning, internships, semesters abroad, and short-term study trips facilitated by universities and other educational organizations. The purpose of such programs is to create structured opportunities in which students are able to apply knowledge acquired in the classroom within settings external to traditional learning environments, in order to engage directly with the content being studied and reflect upon these experiences (see Cantor, 1995). Importantly, the positive impacts of

experiential learning opportunities on student learning “have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds” (Kuh, 2008).

The foundations of this educational approach were established by John Dewey, who understood experiential learning as the product of reflection on everyday encounters. As Dewey (1938) explains, learning typically occurs through our interaction with our environment in everyday life and our reflection upon these experiences. Such situations demand active engagement on the part of the learner. While Dewey’s ideas have been applied across the disciplines, his concern with the direct engagement of citizens with the processes of democracy is particularly pertinent. Consequently, experiential learning opportunities that immerse students in political internships, civic-based service programs, and educational experiences in Washington, D.C., have become a staple of many political science departments.

Studies have highlighted the educational benefits of such programs, such as American University’s Washington Semester Program (AUWSP), citing their positive impact on students, such as evidence of improved GPAs, increased class participation, increased confidence in the classroom, and more involvement in service-learning, campus, and community activities (Lowenthal & Sosland, 2007). These conclusions align with the scholarly literature on the academic, as well as personal, benefits of study abroad programs more generally (see Black & Duhon, 2006; Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Carlson, Barber, & Burn, 1991; Myers et al., 2005). As George Gmelch argues, “much of the personal benefit of travel comes not from what students learn about the places or cultures they visit, but from the need to continuously make decisions and deal with the demands of daily life in new and unfamiliar settings” (1997, 475). Study abroad experiences, therefore, not only provide opportunities for students to apply the knowledge they have learned in the classroom, but also place students in situations in which they learn about themselves on a more personal level.

The exploration undertaken here differs slightly from this literature in its focus on a short-term study trip to Washington, D.C. While the bulk of the research on student travel concerns semester abroad programs, there are a handful of studies that discuss the impact of short-term travel experiences on student learning (see Brokaw, 1996; Gordon & Smith, 1992; Koernig, 2007). However, this literature has primarily been generated by scholars in business administration education, rather than in the liberal arts and political science, more specifically, and (as far as this author knows) none of these contributions examine study trips involving travel within the United States, rather than abroad.

Organization of the 2009 Presidential Inauguration Course

This experiential learning opportunity took the form of a special topics course held during the Bryant University Winter Session in January 2009. This course was divided into two primary components. The first was a traditional in-class portion conducted over three full days on campus, which involved lectures, reading assignments, and discussions. This pre-departure phase aimed to establish the intellectual groundwork to assure that students had a meaningful and rigorous academic experience in Washington, D.C. In particular, it explored the leadership opportunities and challenges

that would meet President Barack Obama once he took office. Of primary focus were analyses of the dominant policy issues, election results and the partisan make-up of Congress, a possible shifting of political winds among the American people, the role of media, modern developments in the office of the presidency, and Obama's own policy perspectives, governing philosophy, and character.

The second portion of the course involved ten days in Washington, D.C. that culminated with the historic Presidential Inauguration ceremonies on January 20, 2009. This "in the field" phase was not only designed to enhance, reinforce, and build upon the knowledge gained from the in-class portion of the course, but, importantly, to provide a range of opportunities for students to apply this knowledge and reflect upon these experiences.

As the instructor, my primary goal for the experiential learning portion of this course in Washington, D.C. was to find a balance between structured and unstructured time. The structured component was largely organized by The Washington Center for Internships and Seminars, which developed a seven-day seminar, "The Presidential Inauguration," as part of their Campaign 2008 Presidential Academic Seminar Series. This seminar was designed to "provide a unique experience by giving the students various frameworks in which they can apply theory, knowledge, and skills to real-life situations" (Washington Center, 2008). The program involved speakers such as Ted Koppel and Pakistani Ambassador Husain Haqqani, small discussion groups oriented around Michael Genovese's text, *Memo to a President* (2008), and site visits to Capitol Hill, embassies, think tanks, and party headquarters.

However, to facilitate the personal growth that results from such travel opportunities, it was also important to allow students ample time to freely explore Washington, D.C. As those who have accompanied students on study abroad trips can testify, programs that are too structured can lead to student discontent and robs them of opportunities for experiencing everyday experiences in an unfamiliar city. Therefore, there were blocks of time set aside for students explore independently. As research on study abroad programs indicate, success at meeting challenges, such as mastering a new public transportation system, tremendously increased student self-confidence. In fact, witnessing the transition from the first day during which students clustered together and followed my every move to the independent, confident, flexible, and adaptable students they emerged as a week-and-a-half later was impressive. I was also pleased to discover that the students used their free time to explore the Smithsonian Museums and attend Hillary Clinton's senate confirmation hearings.

Student Motivations and Expectations

To enroll in the 2009 Presidential Inauguration course, students were required to participate in a competitive application process. In addition to an academic screening by the Office of Undergraduate Advising and a judicial screening by the Office of Student Affairs, students were asked to make a convincing case for their admittance to this Winter Session course. To do so, they wrote an essay in response to this broadly-worded prompt:

“In a separately typed essay (approx. 1-2 pages), please explain why you are interested in participating in this course and attending the Washington Center 2009 Inauguration program in Washington, D.C. In your answer, be sure to describe what you hope to gain by participating in this program.”

Seventeen students applied to participate and the sixteen applicants in good academic standing were accepted. The students' motivations for participating in the program and their expectations of what would be gained were examined through a grounded theory analysis of these application essays.

Methodology

My analysis examines the data collected from the student application essays by employing grounded theory. The grounded theory approach involves an iterative process in which data gathering and analysis occur simultaneously through a step-by-step process with the aim of moving from general observations to the identification of specific patterns. This approach is appropriate for this study because there is little research on this particular topic and the project involves the collection of descriptive data from a quasi-natural setting. The setting was not completely natural as a result of the competitive application process, which presumably encouraged students to strategically craft their answers in ways they perceived would be most convincing. However, this does not discount the importance of the respective underlying motivations that inspired them to willingly embrace the academic burdens associated with this demanding experiential learning opportunity.

Additionally, this approach is appropriate when examining individuals' interactions, engagement, personal perceptions, and meaning-making within a particular process (Creswell, 1998). Rather than beginning with a set framework and applying a theory to test, this interpretive, qualitative approach starts with a broad research question that becomes more specific as the phenomenon being studied comes into focus and its key issues or characteristics “emerge” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Therefore, the method employed in my study relies on an open-ended approach to data gathering combined with inductive analysis.

Guided by the methodology of grounded theory, the data collected from the application essays were analyzed or “coded” by inducing general categories of student claims and then further dividing these categories into more specific topics through an iterative process of data analysis and data reduction. The coding process began with a focus on the description of “big picture” features of the material being studied. The purpose was to “crack open” the data to identify general themes that could then be further explored in subsequent, deeper steps of analysis (see Strauss & Corbin, 1994). At the point, this iterative analysis process adds nothing more to the understanding of meaning, saturation is achieved and coding is completed.

Analysis

My first step involved an effort to use the two-part, open-ended essay question on the student applications as a means of dividing and classifying the data. The prompt asked students to “explain why you are interested in participating in this course” and

“describe what you hope to gain by participating in this program.” My analysis proceeded with the assumption that this two-part prompt would generate two different sorts of responses. However, during the first round analyzing the data, it quickly became clear that the students interpreted these two questions as one and the same. While the structures of their essays reflected an effort to divide the two, the content of both sections of the essay mirrored each other in terms of responses. To clarify, many of the students’ early paragraphs began with “I am interesting in participating in this course because” and latter paragraphs began with “By participating, I hope to” Yet, these introductory phrases were followed by the repetition of goals or motivations, rather than expectations. For example, students indicated in the early paragraphs that they wanted to participate in order to “broaden my knowledge of politics” and “take advantage of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” while latter paragraphs declared their hope to “further understand how politics work in Washington” and “experience a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that most Americans will never have a chance to experience.”

Reflecting on the effectiveness of this choice, it became clear that my initial means of organizing these data had led to more confusion than clarification. Consequently, in an effort to allow for their meaning and significance to emerge in more clarity and depth, I engaged in a second round of coding. In this second iteration of my analysis, I disregarded how students introduced their responses, as well as where within the essay their responses appeared, and, instead, allowed for more specific categories to emerge from their writing.

This iterative process of analysis followed the grounded theory approach to coding by moving from breaking down the data based on simple questions, such as *why* versus *what*, to identifying similar types of responses and grouping them together into categories that share the same conceptual label. Once these codes emerged, I returned to my interpretation of the data in order to further refine these categories. Saturation was achieved after further examinations of the students’ application essays resulted in no additional codes or further refinement.

This approach revealed five primary categories of motivations, listed here according to their frequency of appearance. The students’ decisions to apply for the course were motivated by their expectations that it would (1) offer a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity, (2) increase their knowledge and understanding of American politics, (3) make them better citizens and/or more informed voters, (4) aid their future careers, and (5) offer an experiential learning opportunity that could not be gained in the classroom.

Findings

(1) A “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity

Considering the historic nature of any presidential inauguration, it is not surprising that all sixteen students recognized and addressed the rare opportunity to “witness history” that the course would offer. However, the context in which these essays were written should be further clarified. In order to participate, the students’ applications were due by October 31, 2008, four days before the election of Barack Obama. Of course, public opinion polls indicated a substantial lead for Obama at this time, but the essays were not written in the context of the immediate post-election excitement.

Regardless, seven of the sixteen essays specifically used the phrase “once-in-a-lifetime,” with one stating that “The cliché ‘once in a lifetime experience’ hardly seems to explain the opportunity that this course provides.” The other students made references to “an opportunity I may never get to experience again,” “an experience most Americans will never have the possibility to have,” “a unique and extraordinary experience,” “a unique and valuable educational experience that I may never have again,” “an event many people in this country cannot say they have experienced,” and the belief that this chance was “too great of an opportunity to pass up.”

It is clear that these students were primarily attracted by the opportunity to participate in and witness this historic event. But these references specifically referred to attending the presidential inauguration, which certainly was the draw of the course (and for good reason), but, in reality, it was only one day within a larger fourteen day academic experience. Was their initiative to participate inspired by other aspects of the course as well?

(2) Increase their knowledge and understanding of American politics

All sixteen of the students also mentioned their interest in participating in the course in order to increase their knowledge and understanding of American politics. As was the case with the “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” response, this response is unsurprising and was expected for two primary reasons. First, thirteen of the students are either majors in Politics & Law (four students) or minors in Political Science (nine students). The remaining students had previously taken one of my American politics courses and clearly had strong interests in the subject. The other reason why this sort of response is unsurprising was that the students were applying to gain acceptance to the course. Therefore, it makes sense that they would strategically identify the acquisition of knowledge as one of their primary goals based on the recognition that I would be expecting such answers in their essays (and they were right).

The responses that fell into this category were mostly of a very broad nature, whether they came from majors, minors, or others. They included the desire to “broaden my knowledge of politics,” “obtain a deeper meaning of the United States government,” “learn as much as I can,” “gain more knowledge, insight and understanding of the world of politics,” “have a much better understanding of politics, our government, and about the president-elect,” gain a “further understanding how politics work in Washington,” “learn about these processes and give me deeper insight of our national government,” “learn more about politics,” “learn more about the American political process and its functioning,” and “expand my knowledge about politics.”

The few more specific responses concerning the acquisition of knowledge offered more instrumental interpretations of how this knowledge could be applied in the future. These included gaining “exposure to the United States political system in order to better understand its strategies,” “learn more about the government so that I can inform others who are unclear about the American political system,” “form more educated opinions about the functions of presidential administrations,” “not simply accept the spin that the media give you,” and “gain a framework for analyzing prospective leaders to understand how they would and will work with the challenges presented to them.”

The conclusion that can be drawn from these responses is that students shared an expectation that they would indeed learn as a result of this experience, but were both unsure about what exactly they would learn, as well as unsure about what they wanted to learn.

(3) Make them better citizens and/or more informed voters

The third and fourth categories of responses can be interpreted as subsets of the second—that is, as more specific explanations of what students hope to learn from their experiences in the course. However, structurally, they often appeared in separate locations within the students' essays. Nine of the sixteen students wrote that their desire to participate, or goal to be achieved by participating, was related to their interest in becoming better citizens.

These responses took two particular forms. The first more instrumental form concerned voting or, more generally, making informed political judgments. Students wrote that the experience would help “me in the future to make an informed decision when voting,” “gain knowledge as a voter,” “give me the capacity to make more effective electoral decisions and aid surrounding citizens in understanding and supporting political actions,” provide “the ability to better assess the merit of America’s national leaders,” “greatly enhance my cognitive skills as an American citizen,” and that it is “important to be an informed citizen.”

The second type of response made reference to more value-based, rather than instrumental, notions of citizenship. These included “I believe that it is important as an American and especially as someone who voted to witness such an event and learn how such a process (the transition of power) is put into action,” the explanation that to “witness various significant events in Washington D.C., would be a great honor of mine as a citizen of the United States,” and that it is a “civic duty” to participate.

Political science literature suggests that participation in experiential learning opportunities can help students develop into more engaged citizens with a fuller sense of civic duty. The data from these student essays indicates that this civic development was an expectation of many students that motivated their decision to participate.

(4) Aid their future careers

At the instrumental level, some students were motivated to participate in this experiential learning course in order to further their future careers. This advantage, they believe, would come through either knowledge acquisition or the establishment of personal connections for future networking.

Seven of the sixteen students referenced the desire to aid their future careers as motivation for participating. Considering the context of Bryant University, this is a smaller number than I had expected. With a long history as a business school, which only developed majors in the liberal arts during the past five years, there is a strong practical-minded, career-focused mentality among the general student body. This is certainly reflected in the responses of students who mentioned this as a motivation. Students indicated that the experience would help “pursuing the dream of one day representing the U.S. government,” “will not only help me in my studies, but also in my career,” will “create opportunities; networking and exposure to the American politics

system could broaden my views and enrich my experience,” would build on “my hopes of one day working in our nation’s capital,” “develop the analytical skills needed to stay current and competitive in the field of politics,” “benefit my current understanding of the United State political structure and will be vital for my future career,” allow “my interest in law and in politics [to] someday come together;...being a part of this class will give me a better idea how to accomplish this,” “gain firsthand knowledge on the field I wish to pursue a career in,” and even “help in my position as Treasurer in sorority.”

(5) Offer an experiential learning opportunity that could not be gained in the classroom

Seven students acknowledged in their writing that their desire to participate in the 2009 Presidential Inauguration course was at least partially motivated by their understanding that the sort of learning gained outside the classroom is somehow qualitatively different than that gained in a more traditional environment. At the most general level, students indicated that the experience would provide “something that I could not learn to its fullest extent in the classroom,” offer a “real world classroom,” allow them to apply knowledge to “a real world situation” and “learn beyond the internet or the classroom,” and that “chances such as this do not exist in most Political Science classes.”

However, two students were much more specific about their understanding of the benefits of experiential learning. One, an international student, indicated

Every student gets bored of theories learnt in the classroom and how confusing their abstract nature can be sometimes. Political Science is a subject area, however, which provides its students the opportunity to easily practicalise whatever they learn in the classroom. Participation in this program will undoubtedly afford me a chance to witness politics as practiced by major political actors. In this way, some of the theories I have learnt in Politics classes I have taken will come alive for me and be much more realistic and meaningful.

The other, a major in Sociology Service-Learning, wrote that the course would offer “a very hands-on approach” and

the sort of knowledge that classrooms cannot provide. Classrooms can give you all the definitions, facts, and examples they want, but these are by no means replacements for the real life examples. This trip would be a true real life example the classroom cannot provide, yet includes the initial classroom studying to ensure knowledge for the history we will be witnessing. There is nothing better than a class you know you will really enjoy.

The literature on experiential learning indicates that students often gain an understanding of the benefits of this sort of learning only after reflecting upon their experiences. However, the data collected from the sixteen student application essays suggests that some students do recognize this value, albeit often in a very general way, prior to taking advantage of an experiential learning opportunity. And more importantly than simply recognizing it, a small number of the students identified the chance to learn outside the classroom as a primary motivating factor in their decision to take the initiative.

Conclusions

While the survey size and quasi-natural setting of this limited study do not provide the comparative data necessary to develop a general theory from its analysis, it does offer insights into student motivation that might be applicable to future efforts to encourage participation in experiential learning opportunities. The final step of a grounded theory approach is to compare the emergent findings of the analysis with existing literature to explore similarities and differences (Eisenhardt, 1989). In this paper, I will do so briefly by recognizing the overlap between my findings and those of E. Gil Clary, et.al. (1998), concerning the motivations of volunteers.

Guided by their functional orientation, Clary and his coauthors argue that there are six motivational functions that are served by participating in volunteerism, which they categorize as (1) values, (2) understanding, (3) social, (4) careers, (5) protective, and (6) enhancement. The fifth function, protective, which focuses on the reduction of guilt through volunteering, is less applicable to the current study, although it could play a role in the choice to participate in service-learning. However, the remaining five functions each suggest that efforts by colleges and universities to encourage more students to participate in other forms of voluntary experiential learning, such as this short-term study trip to Washington, D.C., could learn much about promoting this course by exploring the motivations that drive individuals to take the initiative to volunteer.

Data from the students' application essays indicate their recognition of the 2009 Presidential Inauguration course as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Although many experiential learning opportunities may not be as historic, and this "payoff" was highlighted in the marketing and promotion of this course, their other responses suggest that it would also be valuable to draw potentially-interested students' attention to the values, understanding, social, careers, and enhancement elements that might also encourage them to take the initiative. First, participating in experiential learning, akin to volunteerism, provides an opportunity for students to "express values" (Clary, et. al, 1998; 1517), such as a feeling of civic duty. Second, it "involves the opportunity to...permit new learning experiences and the chance to exercise knowledge, skills, and abilities that might otherwise go unpracticed (Clary, et.al, 1998; 1518), such as the application of knowledge gained in the classroom to real world experiences. Third, participation has "career-related benefits" (Clary, et.al, 1998; 1518), such as preparing for acquiring knowledge for a new career or networking, as some of the students' responses indicated. Fourth, it could "enhance positive affect" by providing opportunities for students to develop personal character through confidence-building and enhanced self-understanding.

Interestingly, one motivation that Clary and his coauthors highlights, which ultimately seems to have had the most significant and long-lasting educational benefit for the students, was one that none of the students had mentioned in their application essays. This is the social motivation, which involves the development of "relationships with others" (Clary, et.al, 1998; 1518). For the most part, the sixteen students who travelled to Washington, D.C. did not know each other prior to the course. While, as their instructor, I hoped that the insights and knowledge they acquired during this experience would be something that the students carry with them, it became abundantly clear that they gained and have retained something much deeper. The experience not only placed

students in situations in which they were able to learn more about themselves, as the literature indicates, but also to learn more about others. The personal relationships that emerged were something fundamentally different and far more fulfilling than those established in the classroom—both among students, as well as between students and myself. Gaining this invaluable social education was not indicated as a motivation for students to participate, nor was it an expectation when they took the initiative to apply. This suggests that college and universities seeking to encourage students to take the initiative and participate in voluntary experiential learning opportunities should not shy away from promoting this social motivation. The deep relationships that students establish with others is one among a number of additional personal, academic, and civic benefits that students will take away from this experience.

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