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# *Choosing to Serve?* *An Exploration of Student Self-Selection of Service Learning Projects*

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## *Abstract*

*This study explores student selection of service learning projects in lieu of traditional library research projects. One hundred fifty-four strategic management students completed surveys exploring their tolerance of ambiguity, time pressure, attitudes toward civic participation, self-efficacy toward service, political conservatism, and the role business school's should play in civic education. The study examined their responses to survey questions in light of their project selection. The study identified factors important for faculty in designing and developing service learning projects as well as key areas for future research.*

## Introduction

In recent years, numerous universities have aggressively pursued an increase in the use of service learning approaches in the classroom (Jones, 2003). This powerful pedagogy allows students to apply classroom theories and expand their knowledge base while serving in the community. Service learning has been defined in numerous ways. For the purposes of this study, we have adopted the following definition:

Service learning is a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995)

A wide variety of studies have shown that service learning has a positive effect on student personal development in the areas of personal efficacy, moral development, leadership, social responsibility, and civic participation (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyster & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). However, the literature has not explored situations where students are given the *option* to select a service learning project in lieu of a traditional library research project. Will students select service learning? If so, which students and why? What demographic differences may exist between those that select a service learning project and those that do not? What factors might affect a student's decision to choose a service learning project? What might pre-dispose a student to choose service learning? Answers to these questions can help guide practitioners in the design of service learning projects and also provide important insights on the benefits gained by students involved in service learning projects. Our hope is that the results of this exploratory study will help frame a series of hypothesis to be investigated in future research.

## Context of the Study

For this study, senior undergraduate business students in a large mid-western university were surveyed during the first class session of a required strategic management course. For the major project in this capstone strategic management course, students were given a choice of completing a traditional library research project or a service-learning project. One hundred fifty-four students—85 male (55.2%), and 69 female (44.8%)—in seven different course sections were participants in the study. All of the students were taught by the same professor. Students included representatives from a wide variety of business majors including accounting, management, computer information systems, marketing, and finance. After completing the survey, students were formed into groups by the professor based on their preferred type of project (i.e. service learning or library research).

The traditional library research project assignment required students to identify an industry and three organizations within that industry for strategic analysis. Next, they were to assess the industry and compare and contrast the three companies' operations, business practices, financial results, strategic position, etc. In addition to an industry analysis, the students were asked to highlight the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) in the internal and external environments of each of the companies. Next, they were asked to develop strategic plans and make strategic recommendations for future actions in each organization. This first option will subsequently be referred to as the *library research project*.

The service learning project assignment asked students to select a not-for-profit community organization (from a list provided by the professor) that they would contact and work with directly to develop a strategic plan. These organizations had responded to a university request for community organi-

zations desiring assistance with strategic planning. The goal of this project was to assess the organization's existing situation (including strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and develop strategic plans and recommendations for the organization. Their analysis and recommendations were shared with the organization according to the organization's wishes. This second option will subsequently be referred to as the *service learning project*.

Specific requirements for the paper and presentation were consistent between the two projects. For both projects, students completed a SWOT analysis, mission statement analysis, financial analysis, etc. In addition, the professor attempted to ensure that the time required for each assignment would be relatively comparable.

### Study Design

On the first day of class, students were given a 46-item survey to complete. The survey was comprised of six different scales plus demographic questions. Table 1 presents demographic information.

Each of the six scales were selected for their potential to reveal insight on student selection of service learning projects. As this was an exploratory study, we wanted to examine a variety of potential impacts on students' choices. Therefore, scales were selected to assist us in discovering some of the reasons students may select service learning projects over traditional library research projects. Participants were asked to respond to each scale item on the basis of a 5-point Likert-type scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The scales used were:

1. Tolerance of Ambiguity, 5 items; Sample Question: "I would like to live in a foreign country for awhile" (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992).
2. Self-Efficacy Towards Service, 6 items; Sample Question: "I can have a positive impact on social problems" (Weber, Weber, Sleeper, & Schneider, 2004).
3. Civic Participation, 5 items, Sample Question: "I am concerned about local community issues" (Weber, Weber, Sleeper, & Schneider, 2004).
4. Political Conservatism, 5 items, Sample Question: "Labor unions should be stronger and have more influence generally" (Shimp & Sharma, 1987).

5. Business Education's Role in Social Issues (BERSI) 6 items; Sample Question: "Colleges of business must prepare students to be civic leaders as well as business leaders" (Sleeper, Schneider, Weber, & Weber, 2006).
6. Time Pressure, 3 items; Sample Question: "I seem to be busier than most people I know" (Srinivasan & Ratchford, 1991).

### Exploration of Demographic Differences

What percent of students would select the service learning project? We anticipated students would be more likely to choose a library research project as this assignment is more familiar to them. We thought the community service projects would be more intimidating, given the need to interact directly with the community. In fact, a surprising 105 students (68.2%) elected the service learning project. The remaining 49 students (31.8%) chose the library research project.

We also wondered if those that selected a service learning project would differ by gender from those that selected the library research project. Historically, women have been viewed as more likely to care about others and to act on those concerns. They have been viewed as more nurturing and more willing to engage personally with those in need (Keith, Nelson, Schlabach, & Thompson, 1990; Lauber, Nordt, Falcatto, & Röessler, 2002; Pancer & Pratt, 1999). Therefore, we thought that perhaps females would be more likely to select service learning projects. The study revealed that females were slightly more likely to choose service learning projects (75.4%) versus males (62.4%). The difference was statistically significant at the .10 level ( $\chi^2 = 2.97, p = .085$ ).

Another demographic we wished to explore was whether grade point average (GPA) would differ between students who selected a library research project and those that did not. Our a priori perception was that students with higher GPAs might be more concerned about maintaining their GPAs and thus, less likely to select a project with more unknowns. Surprisingly, on a 4.0 scale, there was virtually no difference between the mean GPAs of the students who chose the service learning project ( $M = 3.09, SD = .32$ ) and those that chose the library research project ( $M = 3.04, SD = .36$ ). This difference was not statistically significant ( $t = .20, p = ns$ ).

We were also curious if different majors would be more likely to choose the service learning project. We anticipated

Table 1  
*Demographic Survey Data*

| Subject Subgroup  | Mean    | SD       |
|---|---------|----------|
| Hours students volunteered for charitable or non-profit organization in past year   | 22.6    | 2.6      |
| Hours per week students worked in the past year                                     | 25.2    | 10.0     |
| Number of years student was member of any charitable or non-profit organization     | 3.8     | 6.0      |
| Dollars students contributed to charitable or non-profit organizations in past year | \$88.40 | \$205.25 |
| Grade Point Average   | 3.08    | 0.35     |

that students from more quantitative degrees like accounting and finance might be less likely to choose the service learning project because of the need to interact more with people; whereas, we anticipated that marketing and management majors would be more interested in projects that involved higher levels of interpersonal contact.

In fact, approximately 75% of marketing and management majors chose the service learning project. However, it is interesting to note that more than half of the finance majors (64.7%) and half (50%) of the accounting and business computer majors also chose the service learning project (see Table 2). In no discipline were students more likely to choose the library research project over the service learning project. Due to fragmented sample size across nine different business majors, these differences could not be tested for statistical significance.

What would prompt students to select the library research project? Would students perceive the library project as less work? Perhaps they would view this project as more structured and controllable with less ambiguity. Would students who had a higher level of previous civic involvement be more or less likely to choose a service learning project? Would students whose families had a higher level of civic involvement be more likely to choose a service learning project? As noted previously, we selected a number of different scales to help us explore these questions.

### Time Pressure

We thought that students might presume that a service learning project that involved interacting with the community to gather information would require a greater time commitment than library research. Therefore, we wanted to explore how busy students were and if students who were busier, or

who perceive themselves to be busier, would be more likely to choose the library research project with an anticipated lesser time commitment.

This was tested in two ways. First, students were asked to indicate the number of hours per week they were employed. The mean number of hours worked per week by students who chose the library research project was 26.0 ( $SD = 9.6$ ). The mean number of hours worked by students who chose the service learning project was 24.9 ( $SD = 10.2$ ). The difference was in the expected direction but the two means were not statistically different ( $t = 0.67, p = ns$ ).

Second, students were also asked to complete a three-item scale designed to measure time pressure: "I seem to be busier than most people I know; usually there is so much to do that I wish I had more time; I usually find myself pressed for time" (Srinivasan & Ratchford, 1991). Students were asked to rate each item from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The resultant three-item summed scale could range from a low score of three to a high score of fifteen, with larger scores indicating greater stated time pressure. The mean scores were 11.5 ( $SD = 2.1$ ) for students who chose the library research project and 11.4 ( $SD = 2.3$ ) for students who chose the service learning project, a difference in the predicted direction but not statistically significant ( $t = .25; p = ns$ ).

It is interesting to note that at the end of the semester, students working on service learning projects reported investing a mean of 27.6 hours ( $SD = 11.2$ ) on their projects, compared to a mean of 23.4 hours ( $SD = 12.8$ ) for those who chose the library research project. The mean difference was significant at the .05 level ( $t = 2.04; p = .043$ ). So, service learning projects did require more time than library research projects.

Table 2  
Percentage of Students Selecting Library Research Project or Service Learning Project by Academic Major

| Major  | Library Research Project |           | Service Learning Project |           |
|--|--------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------|
|  | Percentage               | Frequency | Percentage               | Frequency |
| Accounting<br><i>n</i> = 14                        | 50.0                     | 7         | 50.0                     | 7         |
| Business Computer Information Sys.<br><i>n</i> = 6 | 50.0                     | 3         | 50.0                     | 3         |
| Finance<br><i>n</i> = 34                           | 50.0                     | 17        | 50.0                     | 17        |
| Insurance<br><i>n</i> = 2                          | 0.0                      | 0         | 100.0                    | 2         |
| International Bus.<br><i>n</i> = 4                 | 50.0                     | 2         | 50.0                     | 2         |
| Management<br><i>n</i> = 24                        | 25.0                     | 6         | 75.0                     | 18        |
| Marketing<br><i>n</i> = 58                         | 24.1                     | 14        | 75.9                     | 44        |
| Real Estate<br><i>n</i> = 10                       | 50.0                     | 5         | 50.0                     | 5         |
| Other<br><i>n</i> = 2                              | 0.0                      | 0         | 100.0                    | 2         |

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## *Tolerance for Ambiguity*

We anticipated that students would assume that library research projects based on secondary sources would be more easily accessible and somewhat more reliable than the field research needed for the service learning project. Field research depends in part on the perspective and needs of the client organization and on client time available to meet with students on the project. The clients' schedules and prioritization of the service learning project were less directly under the control of the student team. In addition, the quality and type of data available from the field research may vary significantly from what the students required to complete their project. Some people's personalities are better equipped to handle the greater ambiguity posed by these factors. Those less suited to tolerating ambiguity would be expected then to choose the more defined, more controllable library research project.

Tolerance for ambiguity was measured with five items that were the positively scored items from McQuarrie and Mick's (1992) 12-item tolerance of ambiguity scale. Each item was scored from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Scale items included: "I would like to live in a foreign country for awhile; I tend to like obscure or hidden symbolism; I am tolerant of ambiguous situations; Vague and impressionistic pictures appeal to me more than realistic pictures; Generally, the more meanings a poem has, the better I like it." This five-item version of the scale yielded an alpha of .61 in this study. The five-item summed scale had possible scores ranging from five to a maximum of twenty-five, with larger scores indicating a higher tolerance for ambiguity. The mean scores were 15.4 ( $SD = 2.7$ ) for students who chose the library research project and 16.0 ( $SD = 3.1$ ) for those who chose the service learning project. This difference is in the predicted direction but is not statistically significant ( $t = 1.19; p = ns$ ).

## *Political Conservatism*

We wondered if students who were more politically conservative would be less likely to choose a service learning project. We thought that those who want to help the less fortunate may tend toward more liberal politics. To explore this, we included Shimp and Sharma's (1987) 5-item scale that included such questions as: "Poverty could be almost entirely done away with if we made certain basic changes in our social and economic system;" "More government controls over business are needed." Each item was scored from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The results from this scale were very interesting. Students who chose the service learning project had a mean score of 12.3 ( $SD = 3.34$ ) versus a mean of 12.5 ( $SD = 3.2$ ) for the library research project. Thus, in contrast to our expectations, the more liberal students chose the more traditional library research project although the difference was not significant.

## *Previous Civic Involvement*

Research has shown that individuals who have been involved in service activities demonstrated a higher commitment to serving in the community (Astin, Sax & Avalos, 1999; Sax & Astin, 1997; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997). Given prior research findings, we anticipated that students with higher levels of previous civic involvement would choose the service learning project. We believed that they would be more likely to feel that such a project is important and, hence, more worthy of their time. Moreover, we thought they probably would have a higher comfort level with conducting community service.

Students were asked three direct questions to assess their extent of civic involvement, including a) how many hours they had volunteered for charitable or other non-profit organizations during the past year, b) how many years they had been a member of any organizations that had a charitable or non-profit service as part of its mission, and c) how much money they had contributed to charitable or other non-profit organizations during the past year. For the first two indicators it was expected that students with more hours of service and more years of involvement in charitable organizations would select the service learning project. For the third indicator, dollars contributed, it was expected that those with a lower level of donations would choose the service learning project.

Prior research has shown that individuals who contribute more financially prefer this method of civic engagement to getting personally involved with civic activities. For all three questions (hours volunteered, membership years in a charitable organization and dollars contributed) the results were in the proposed direction. However, the differences were not statistically significant. These same three assessments were also investigated after dichotomizing each into a) any volunteer hours in past year (yes/no), b) any membership years (yes/no), and c) any dollars contributed in past year (yes/no). Students with any volunteer hours or any years as a member of an outreach organization were slightly more inclined to select a service learning project, while those who had contributed dollars were slightly less inclined to select a service learning project. However, none of these relationships were strong enough to reach the level of statistical significance.

## *Attitude Towards Civic Participation*

It was believed that students with higher scores on a measure of civic participation would choose the service learning project. Illustrative items from this scale include "I am concerned about local community issues" and "I want to support those less fortunate." This hypothesis was tested with a six-item civic participation scale, with each item scored from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. This scale was developed and validated by Weber, Weber, Sleeper, and Schneider (2004). The six-item summed scale scores could range from a low of six to a high of thirty, with larger scores signifying greater civic participation.



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Mean scores were 22.8 ( $SD = 2.5$ ) for students who chose the service learning project and 23.4 ( $SD = 3.3$ ) for students who chose the library research project. These results were not in the hypothesized direction (i.e., students who chose the service learning project tended to lean toward less civic participation) but the differences were not statistically significant ( $t = -1.06, p = ns$ ).

## Discussion of Exploratory Study Results

The results of this exploratory study provide some important insights for faculty and administrators implementing service learning. We learned that students in this study were more likely (68.2%) to choose service learning projects over traditional library research projects. This is very important information for practitioners in designing projects or in contemplating requiring service learning projects in their courses. This datum can also help administrators encourage faculty to attempt service learning projects. Secondly, this noted preference may be evidence of a positive student bias towards service learning experiences and should be considered when examining the benefits and outcomes of developing service learning projects.

Moreover, all majors either preferred the service learning project or found it of equal interest to a library research project, and there were no differences in the mean grade point average of students selecting service learning. These are key considerations for professors considering developing service learning components for their courses. Whether professors choose to make the project optional or not, it is important to know that grade point averages did not differ between groups nor did the student's selected business major impact student project preferences. Consequently, results of this study provide faculty with empirical support for assuring administration that both low and high performing students are interested in service learning. In addition, faculty administration (Deans) who want to encourage faculty across all business disciplines to undertake service learning projects have initial empirical evidence to support that service learning would interest their majors.

At the end of the semester, students did report that service learning projects took more time than other projects. This is important for faculty to note in developing service learning assignments. Faculty should factor in the extra time needed to meet with clients and to work with less than ideal information provided by clients. This is critical when attempting to balance the workload between service learning and library research projects.

Although the difference was not significant, students who were more tolerant of ambiguity were more likely to choose service-learning projects. Faculty and administration should make every attempt to reduce the ambiguity of the project. This can be done by having prospective client companies make presentations to the class about their organization and about the project they would like completed. In addition, faculty should develop tools for student use in

defining project scope and in reporting on the project both to the client and to the faculty.

As expected, students with previous civic involvement were slightly more likely to select the service learning project. Prior research has shown that individuals with previous civic experience tend to develop a stronger sense of civic responsibility. In contrast though, students with a more positive attitude toward civic participation were less likely to choose service learning, although this was not a statistically significant difference. Several factors may contribute to this interesting finding.

First, students may not yet be secure in their convictions. At this stage of life, they are developing their moral and ethical codes and may not yet feel strongly enough about their personal responsibility for civic involvement. Research has shown that students do demonstrate growth in moral reasoning during college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, the growth in moral reasoning is not sufficient to determining moral behavior (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Rest (1994) suggests that moral reasoning may be only one of four factors leading to moral behaviors. The others are sensitivity to the situation, prioritizing moral considerations, and the capacity to implement one's choice (i.e., character). So, while students may have a positive attitude toward civic participation, it may not yet lead to moral behaviors (i.e. choosing service learning projects).

Second, most college students still operate under the umbrella of their parents. That is, they receive moral support, guidance in decisions, financial and emotional support, etc. from their parents. As such, they may perceive they are too young or that it is too soon for them to assume full adult roles in society with associated civic duties. This feeling could be underscored by the fact that they are still on the receiving end of civic aid such as receiving financial aid or government supported education. Thus, they may perceive the responsibility of giving back to society as a mantle they will not assume until they are graduated, employed full-time, and living on their own. This is an area for future research.

Finally, the focus of the project, strategic planning, may have been too closely related to business and too far removed from the recipient of the service to provide students with a clear perception of the civic value of the project or its connection to civic participation. The fact that the projects were part of a course assignment, guided by the professor, and completed for a grade, may have resulted in the students perceiving this project as more of an academic endeavor than one of civic involvement. These factors provide an important area of exploration for future research endeavors.

Our research provides an answer to the question of would students select service learning projects and provides information on what demographic descriptions might apply to those students. Scales used in the study were selected to help identify these differences. The lack of statistically significant results may suggest that these factors (e.g., tolerance of ambiguity, prior civic involvement, etc.) do not play a key

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role in identifying differences between students who choose service learning projects versus library research projects. Alternatively, the sample size may have hindered finding significant differences which could be addressed with a larger sample in a future study.

Future research is needed to further explore why a majority of students selected service learning project over a library research project. Perhaps, as seniors nearing the end of their academic life, they were interested in gaining practical experience to enhance their resume and build confidence in their skills. Perhaps they saw service learning as a great opportunity to get out of the classroom and into the real world. Perhaps students believed that the service learning project, while requiring more time, would be intellectually easier? Other potential predictors could include parent's level of volunteerism, student economic class, religion, and religious participation. Future studies should investigate these factors as well as examine further the exploratory results found in this study.

Future studies that incorporate a pre-measure of student perceptions and attitudes towards civic participation and a post-measure upon completion of a service learning project could also provide additional insights into the selection of service learning and the impact of service learning projects on student development.

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