

1997

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The Benefits of Service: Evidence from Undergraduates



LINDA J. SAX AND ALEXANDER W. ASTIN

Currently, higher education is confronting urgent calls to return to its original mission of developing a well-informed, critically thinking, and civically engaged citizenry. Indeed, recent findings from the annual survey of entering college freshmen by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) reveal record low levels of student

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interest in keeping up to date with political affairs, discussing politics, or working on political campaigns.

What exactly can higher education do to promote citizenship development among students, and at the same time address the myriad problems that continue to plague society?

One answer may be found within the college or university curriculum, through the simple but extremely powerful pedagogical tool known as "service learning." The basic idea behind service learning is to use a community or public service experience to enhance the meaning and impact of traditional course content. Connecting service directly with academic courses makes it quite different

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Summer/Fall 1997

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from "volunteer" work that is performed in the community. Service learning also involves more than simply sending a class of students into communities for additional course credit. Properly designed service learning courses relate the community service experience to the course material and require that students reflect on their experiences through writings, discussions, or class presentations. Service learning not only enriches traditional course content by giving the student an opportunity to 'test' or 'demonstrate' abstract theory in the real world, it also improves the quality of the service being performed by giving it an intellectual underpinning.

Service learning may be implemented in any number of academic fields. For example, students enrolled in a psychology class could conduct counseling, mentoring, or drug education for at-risk school children. Students taking an environmental science course could work with elementary school students to improve conditions in nearby parks. Students enrolled in an English course could design and implement an adult literacy program. A course in urban planning could connect

college students with high school students in order to rehabilitate housing for low-income families or senior citizens. Although service learning courses are most likely to be found in education and the social sciences,¹ the fact is that a service component can be effectively added to nearly any academic course offering.

Student benefits

As colleges and universities increasingly promote service learning and volunteerism as vehicles for citizenship development, it is crucial to determine whether students actually benefit from such experiences. In the case of undergraduates who participate in volunteer service programs, the effects of the program have important implications both for the students themselves and for long-range institutional policy planning. If an institution wishes to strengthen or expand its volunteer service programs, and especially if it is considering expanding classroom-based service learning or introducing a service requirement into the curriculum, the question of how the students' educational and personal development are affected is of central importance.



Over the past few years, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) has conducted a number of studies on the impact of the service experience on the development of undergraduates. These studies were based on data collected through a series of national freshman surveys and follow-up surveys conducted by CIRP.

In 1995-96, we evaluated the Corporation for National Service's Learn and Serve America Higher Education (LSAHE) program, an evaluation conducted jointly by UCLA and the RAND Corporation. LSAHE consists of more than 100 programs at colleges and universities nationwide that are designed to support service learning through student involvement in community service. A sister program to the highly publicized AmeriCorps, LSAHE engages student participants in activities such as tutoring; working with the homeless, poor, and elderly; improving neighborhood environments; preventing crime; and improving community health.

The UCLA portion of the evaluation examined the impact of service participation (as well as service learning in particular) at LSAHE institutions on three general areas of student development: civic responsibility, academic development, and life skills. Survey results are based on freshman and follow-up data collected from 3,450 students attending 42 institutions with LSAHE programs. These respondents include 2,309 service participants and 1,141 nonparticipants.



Campus Compact

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Characteristics of service participants

Who are the students who participate in service during their undergraduate years? Some students are more inclined to seek out service activities than others, and these initial differences must be taken into account before examining the impact of service experiences on student development. Data on entering freshmen were used to identify the characteristics of students that predispose them toward participation in volunteer service during college.

As might be expected, the single most important predisposing factor is whether the student

was a volunteer during high school. Other predisposing factors include self-rated leadership ability, involvement in religious activities, commitment to participating in community action programs, tutoring other students during high school, being a guest in a teacher's home, and being a woman. One of the more interesting self-selection factors is the importance that some students give to "making more money" as a reason for attending college, which turns out to be the only *negative* predictor of a student becoming a volunteer during college. In other words, those entering freshmen who are most likely to become

service participants during college tend *not* to be motivated by materialistic values.

How service experiences affect students

After applying multivariate analyses to account for the influence of the many characteristics that predispose students to engage in community service, we examined the relationship between the service experience and 35 college outcomes in the following areas: civic responsibility, academic attainment, and life skills. The most remarkable result of the study was that *all* 35 student outcome measures were favorably influenced by service participation.²

Civic responsibility

The effects of service are strongest in the area of civic responsibility. For example, students are asked to indicate how much their "commitment to serving the community" had changed since entering college. More than *twice* as many service participants as nonparticipants (60 percent versus 28 percent) reported on the follow-up questionnaire that their commitment to serving the community was either "stronger" or "much stronger" than their commitment had been when they were freshmen. Equally impressive are the results on students' plans for the near future: more than *four* times as many service participants as nonparticipants (39 percent versus 9 percent) indicated that they planned to do volunteer work in the coming fall. Further, during college, student participants were much more likely than nonparticipants to *strengthen* their commitment to the following life goals: promoting racial understanding, participating in community action programs, and influencing social values.

Academic development

Perhaps the most commonly voiced objection to volunteer participation during the undergraduate years is that it consumes time and energy that the student might otherwise devote to "academic" pursuits. This argument has been laid to rest by the results of our longitudinal analyses, which reveal significant positive effects on all ten academic outcomes included in the study. While the analyses reveal that the net benefit attributable to

service participation is quite small in the case of a student's grade point average—about .1 grade points—the fact remains that the effect is *not* negative (as some critics would have us believe); indeed, it is positive and statistically significant. Among students who had at least a B+ average in high school, 69 percent of the service participants



Herb Weisman/Washington University

Students who engage in volunteer service actually spend *more* time on studying and homework than do nonparticipants.

(compared to 56 percent of the nonparticipants) were able to maintain at least a B+ average in college. Among those who entered college with a B or lower average, 27 percent of the service participants (compared to 19 percent of the nonparticipants) were able to improve to at least a B+ average in college.

Even more substantial effects can be observed with other academic outcomes. Perhaps the strongest effect occurred in the case of interaction with faculty: Compared to nonparticipants, service participants are nearly 50 percent more likely to spend at least one hour per week

interacting with faculty (48 percent versus 33 percent for participants and nonparticipants, respectively). And, despite the additional time required for service participation, students who engage in volunteer service actually spend *more* time on studying and homework than do nonparticipants. Participants are substantially more likely than nonparticipants (19 percent versus 12 percent) to spend more than 20 hours per week studying or doing homework, whereas nonparticipants are more than *twice* as likely to spend less than three hours per week doing homework or studying (13 percent versus 5 percent). These results may help explain the positive effect of service participation on students' grade point average.

Service participants also are significantly more likely than nonparticipants to report "stronger" or "much stronger" changes during college in general knowledge, knowledge of a field or discipline, and preparation for graduate or professional school. Participants are more likely than nonparticipants to report that they did extra work for courses. Finally, although both groups show a net decline between pre-test and post-test in their aspirations for doctoral or advanced professional degrees, the decline is significantly greater among nonparticipants. (Students attending LSAHE institutions tend to have much higher freshman-year degree aspirations than the national population of freshmen. The net decline for these students can be attributable to greater realism in their degree plans over time, particularly as

changes in career interests and financial situations lead many students to decide not to attend graduate school.)

Life skills

In the area of life skills, service participants show greater positive change than do nonparticipants in terms of all eight outcomes analyzed, with the largest differences occurring in understanding community problems, knowledge of different races/cultures, acceptance of different races/cultures, and interpersonal skills. Other significant differences that favor service participants include understanding the nation's social problems, the ability to work cooperatively, skills in conflict resolution, and the ability to think critically.

The "real world" value of service participation further reveals itself in the positive effects observed in three areas of student satisfaction: leadership opportunities, relevance of coursework to everyday life, and preparation for future career. Finally, during college, service participants exhibit greater *increases* in social self-confidence and leadership ability than do nonparticipants. As a matter of fact, while service participants show increases during college in their self-rated leadership abilities, nonparticipants actually show slight *decreases* in theirs.

The benefits of course-based service

While the evaluation clearly demonstrates the positive effects of service experiences, we also examined whether course-based service—service learning—

provided any additional benefits to students. We found that service conducted as part of a course provided additional benefits to students in terms of a number of college outcomes, including students' commitment to their communities, preparation for careers, skills in conflict resolution, and understanding of community problems. In all likelihood, this latter finding reflects the fact that the content of many service learning courses often focuses on contemporary social problems. Course-based service also contributed to academic development by increasing the frequency with which students interact with faculty.

Long-term effects

Does service continue to benefit students after they leave college? To determine the answer, we conducted a longitudinal nationwide study of more than 12,000 students, who were surveyed at three time points over a nine-year period: in 1985, as college freshmen; in 1989, as college seniors; and in 1994, as adults who had been out of college for five years.³

Even when controlling for students' freshman-year predisposition to engage in service, results revealed that participation in volunteer service during the undergraduate years is positively associated with a variety of cognitive and affective outcomes. The strongest of these effects is on students' lifelong commitment to volunteerism and community activism. In other words, those students who engage in service as undergraduates develop a greater commitment to civic involvement in the years after college,

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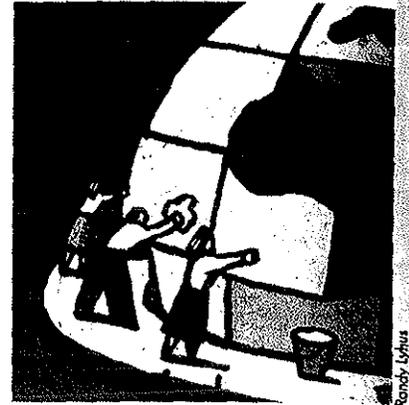
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regardless of their pre-college inclination to become involved in volunteer service work. Undergraduate service participation also enhances a variety of other outcomes, including the students' commitment to promoting racial understanding, helping others in difficulty, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life. Furthermore, participating in service during college is associated with a greater sense of empowerment in the years after college. In other words, service participants become even more strongly committed to the notion that, as individuals, they have the ability to change society.

The long-term benefits of service also are found in the post-graduate and professional realms. Participating in volunteer service work during college is associated with the increased likelihood of attending graduate school, aspiring to and earning higher degrees, and perceiving that the undergraduate college provided good preparation for work. This latter finding is consistent with the notion that participating in service work gives students important practical experience in the "real world." Of particular interest to higher education officials is the finding that undergraduate service participation is associated with an increased likelihood of donating money to the undergraduate college.

Challenges to institutionalization

Despite these apparent benefits of service, it still is quite a challenge for many institutions to incorporate service—particularly service learning—into the every-



day institutional culture. Visits to college campuses have illuminated numerous barriers to the full institutionalization of service as well as effective methods that some institutions have used to promote service on their campuses.

On many campuses, students simply do not know where to go to get connected with service opportunities. Particularly on large campuses, students can be unaware of which campus clubs or organizations provide service to the community. Students often become aware of opportunities only through "word of mouth," which doesn't reach all of the students who would be willing and able to devote some of their time to a service activity.

Perhaps an even more critical barrier to the institutionalization of service on campus is a lack of awareness—or even a resistance—among the faculty. Many faculty still view community service and academic learning as mutually exclusive activities. A recent national survey of undergraduate teaching faculty found that although 80 percent of faculty believe that colleges should encourage students to do community service,

only 2 percent of faculty include a service component in their courses.⁴ Our case study visits to campuses suggest that faculty become highly enthusiastic about service learning once they have had a chance to experience it. The real challenge for administrators, then, is to devise more effective strategies for getting faculty to try it.

A recent article by Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher provides a number of useful recommendations for institutions to encourage implementation of service learning: promoting awareness of service learning by distributing newsletters or articles on service learning, offering faculty development workshops on how to integrate service learning into particular academic fields, securing faculty development funds as incentives to faculty to initiate service learning, and providing faculty with service learning course syllabi.⁵

Bringle and Hatcher also emphasize the importance of a centralized service learning center on campus that can provide a coordinating link between the classroom and the community. Staff at such centers develop and maintain relationships with community agencies in order to coordinate field placement opportunities for students and assist faculty with the development of service learning components in their courses. These staff members can do what many faculty cannot: They can develop effective field placement experiences for students because they have the knowledge, time, and energy that faculty frequently lack.

One of the primary benefits of such centralized coordination is that it allows for greater continuity of community service activities. By and large, the needs of community agencies are fairly constant, even as individual student and faculty participants change over time. The extent to which colleges meet community

needs should not depend on whether a specific service learning course is currently being taught. A centralized service office can work to maintain the institution's commitment to a particular community agency by directing a steady stream of student volunteers to that site and/or by connecting various service

Recommendations of the "Partnering Initiative on Education and Civil Society"

The Partnering Initiative is the result of a year-long process of discussion and dialogue among 44 education associations and organizations. The partners have agreed to work together on a ten-year plan to integrate civic values into every aspect of the educational experience, with emphasis on:

1. Expanding opportunities for students to become more involved in meaningful service with neighborhood organizations by making service learning an integral part of the academic experience.
2. Encouraging students to explore the twin issues of character development and responsible participation in the civil society by integrating service learning, character education, and citizen education into the classroom.
3. Weaving the historical legacy and values of a civil society into a broad range of curricula and community programs.
4. Extending the values of democracy and community to the classroom by encouraging students to participate in designing their own learning experience.
5. Soliciting more direct involvement of community organizations, civic associations, and businesses with local schools, colleges, and universities.
6. Ensuring that faculty, students, families, and communities have a genuine voice in school, college, and university-level policy making.
7. Making every effort to ensure that the human, financial, and community resources needed to accomplish these goals be available.

For more information on the "Partnering Initiative" call (202) 466-2823.

learning classes to that site throughout the year. In that way, community service projects that are designed by one class may be implemented by another class the following term, and then evaluated by yet another class later on. Without a strong community service center, this level of coordination between faculty and community agencies will be nearly impossible to attain.

Administration's role

It is important to note, however, that simply having a community service center on campus is not enough to ensure the institutionalization of service. The importance of the center and its role in the institutional mission must be communicated clearly by top campus administrators. A verbal as well as financial commitment to these centers by campus leadership helps send the message to students, faculty, staff, alumni, and the community at large that the institution values and encourages service.

Another critical factor in the success of such a center is its location on campus. When a community service center is located at the margins of the campus, or is relegated to the basement of a less frequented building, the campus is sending the message that service is "peripheral" to the institution's mission. Ideally, community service centers should be centrally located and should regularly advertise community service opportunities to students and faculty.

Conclusion

The most important factor influencing an institution's ac-

tive commitment to service is whether it is convinced that students actually benefit from the service experience. HERI's research provides some answers: Service work encourages students to become more socially responsible, more committed to serving their communities, more empowered, and more committed to education. Further, the effects of volunteer service participation during the undergraduate years continue to persist in the years after college. ■

¹ Astin, Helen S., Anthony L. Antonio, Christine M. Cress, et al. *Faculty Involvement in Community Service*. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, 1996.

² For additional details on this study, see Sax, Linda J., Alexander W. Astin, and

Helen S. Astin. "What were LSAHE Impacts on Student Volunteers?" *Evaluation of Learn and Serve America: Higher Education: First Year Report*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1996.

³ For additional details on this study, see Astin, Alexander W., Linda J. Sax, and Juan Avalos. "Long-term Effects of Volunteerism During the Undergraduate Years." *The Review of Higher Education*. (In press).

⁴ Sax, Linda J., Alexander W. Astin, Marisol Arredondo, et al. *The American College Teacher: National Norms for 1995-96*. Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles, 1996.

⁵ Bringle, Robert G., and Julie A. Hatcher. "Implementing Service Learning in Higher Education," *Journal of Higher Education*, vol. 67, no. 2, 1996, pg. 221.

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