

**Researching Student Community Service:
An Opportunity to Promote Reflection?**

by

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This paper **Researching Student Community Service: An Opportunity to Promote Reflection?** is a condensed version of a larger research report titled **Student Community Service: An Exploration in Three Motivational Contexts.**

In recent years there has been a growing interest in student community service. It is suggested that the students of the 1980's and 90's are returning to an ethic of community service. Organizations have developed to promote service from both the student and the academic perspectives. The Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) is a student movement promoting community service. Campus Compact represents the academic administration interest in promoting student community service with presidents of institutions forming the membership in the organization. A third organization, the National Society of Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE), includes student community service as a form of the more traditional field based learning/teaching strategies. Service-learning provides a mechanism for integrating community service within the overall mission of the academy. How do these trends developments manifest themselves on the local level? What interests do students bring and gain from community service? Is there a good fit between the structuring of student community service by academic planners and the interests that students bring to the service setting? This research will explore three motivational contexts in which students actively engage in community service. The three contexts are identified as altruistic, academic credit and tuition benefits.

The altruistic context is Lynchburg College in Lynchburg, Virginia. The Volunteer Office, located within Student Affairs, promotes community service as part of the college culture. The program represents the COOL model with a high degree of student

direction and governance

The academic credit context is Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. The Public Service Program, a part of Student Affairs, offers a variety of programs. In the Fourth Credit Option, students may earn an extra credit in many courses. About 20 - 25 students select this option each semester. Students engage in a structured community service project to earn the "extra credit."

The tuition benefit context is The Associates Program at The American University in Washington, D.C. The Center for Student Volunteerism and Community Service, in the Division of Student Affairs. In this program students "earn" a \$1000.00 tuition benefit for a structured tutoring program in a Washington, D.C. school. During the semester of the placement students meet regularly to "process/reflect" on the experience.

METHODOLOGY

It is an axiom of research design that the methodology must closely relate to the purpose of the research. In this study we explore the impact of motivational environments on individual student motivation for community service.

Research Sites and Sampling

In the selection of the three research sites we assumed three distinct motivational environments. They are: Lynchburg College (altruistic/generic), Georgetown University Fourth Credit Option (academic credit) and American University Community Service

Associate Program (tuition benefit) Our samples, therefore, were purposive. Purposive or availability sampling is appropriate when there is a study of an unknown population or little previous research. (Wallizer and Wiener, 1978:437) Staff personnel at each of the sites selected students for interviewing.

Research Sites

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Due to the descriptive and exploratory nature of the research, we used a variety of research techniques. Our interest and initial research questions were based on reading and practice of building a motivational environment at James Madison University--The Center for Service-Learning and the development /teaching of a course on Volunteerism. From this experience/knowledge we developed a preliminary questionnaire. This questionnaire related to students, faculty, and appropriate community service administrators.

First Site Visits

In November 1989 we visited three sites. Focus group interviews were arranged with student community service personnel, administrators, faculty and students. These interviews lasted from 1 to 2 hours. Respondents were eager to talk about community service.

Questionnaire Development

Using information from the initial site visits the authors developed a questionnaire and mailed it to students at the respective schools. Initial site visits provided useful impressionistic information as well as help for refining/developing

a mail questionnaire.

Second Site Visit

Using the near final version of the mail questionnaire as an interview schedule we returned for a second site visit to each school in March-April 1990. The respondents were different from those of the first visit. This technique helped us to refine the questionnaire into final form.

Final Mail Questionnaire

The final version of our questionnaire included closed and open ended questions. Reminders were sent two weeks after the initial mailing. Fifty four of the 73 questionnaires were returned. This was a very good return rate. (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1981:287-290)

We think that the methodological approach in our study was sound in that it not only resulted in data for our research but also provided information to increase our general understanding of student motivation toward community service.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this section we will make some general statements based on our exploratory research and in some cases going beyond these findings.

1. Motivational Environments-While the primary issue of our research is motivational environments we observe positive results in all three. Much more research needs to be done on "outcome assessment" and creating a variety of environments tailored to individual student motivations. There is no one best model for a motivational environment.
2. The Classroom/Community Service Connection-As a result of their community service experience many students see the

community as the "real world" and the classroom as the "unreal world." It is our observation that this is a result of limited faculty involvement in the development of community service programs. When community service is part of a class requirement there is a limited "in-class" effort to make the connections between the classroom learning and the community learning. We think that it is important in the development of community service programs to be intentional in seeing them as extensions of the academic and student development missions of institutions.

3. Overcoming Stereotypes About Who Gets Involved in Community Service Programs-It is often assumed that students who get involved in community service are primarily in the social and behavioral sciences. Our data shows a variety of majors and concentrations. Community service recruiters should "cast their nets wide." Developers of programs should seriously consider the issue of equal access so no student is denied the opportunity to enhance their college experience through community service learning.
4. The Academic Connection-All three of the programs we observed are administratively housed in student affairs/activities. While this connection is most appropriate, we think they could be strengthened by an intentional connection to academic affairs. Academic staff often think of student activities as being about entertaining rather than serious student development. Community service programs provide excellent vehicles for mutual effort and understanding to educate whole persons.
5. The Community Connection-The agency and agency personnel are an important part of the motivational context. Many of the students had difficulty relating to the agency personnel and as a result many had negative experiences in their placement. Misunderstanding often emerges when there is conflicting or misunderstood expectations on the part of agencies and students. A significant role of the Community Service Program is to make sure there are mutual understandings and expectations. A contract arrangement which spells out service and learning objectives is most helpful in this respect.
6. Constructing Motivational Environments-Most students in our sample found their community service experience satisfying. We did not get a good sense of what their learnings were as a result. There is a need for constructing motivational environments with clear

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learning/development objectives. We cannot depend on continuing positive results without adequate visioning, goal and objective setting and strategizing. This process requires broad in-put from the various client populations.

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