Summer 1999

Effects of Service Learning on Student Retention and Success

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Recommended Citation

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Southwestern College (SWC) students who participated in service learning were significantly more likely to complete their English composition course and report greater agreement with statements about learning as it related to career and civic awareness. However, student success rates were not significantly different for service learning students.

Introduction

The need for service learning stems from the philosophical debate between the common good and individual rights. The individualism of the 1970s and 80s has been criticized for undermining the basic community and social values that are the foundation of our freedom. Additionally, new advances in technology seem to be adding to the isolation of the individual in our society.

To change the direction of these trends, leaders in society are calling for a renewed emphasis on the development of community and responsible citizenship through community service activities. In 1994, President Clinton wrote a letter to all college and university presidents requesting their help in "inspiring an ethic of service across the nation" (as cited in Jacoby, 1996, p. 17). While higher education is being questioned about its effectiveness in achieving student learning, Thomas Ehrlich stated, "Service learning is one of several trends in pedagogy that together mark a shift in undergraduate education from an emphasis on teaching to one on learning." (Jacoby, 1996, p. viii)

Faculty members view it as a way to more actively engage students in their own education, but it is not a new pedagogical philosophy. "Community Service Learning (CSL) is a process in education which finds its roots in early American political and educational theories. It is also, however, a form of education which is currently being considered with renewed interest in contemporary, political, and educational contexts." (Mauricio, 1997) John Dewey (1916) declared that one of the aims of education should be to prepare young people to assume responsibilities within the democracy. Indeed, learning civic responsibility through involvement in community service is one way to assure the very survival of democracy. Ernest Boyer (1983) states that interaction with members of the community has the potential of providing students with a response to feelings of alienation and disregard for the community. He proposes that schools institute a "new Carnegie unit," a service requirement for all students.

Many schools are moving toward such a requirement at all levels of education. Some community colleges such as Skagit Valley College in Washington State have adopted service learning hours as a graduation requirement for the Associate Degree. Although the development of civic duty is often given as the rationale for service learning programs, many have been implemented as a teaching methodology to enhance student learning. The experiential component provides the human connection and/ or hands-on connection to an academic subject. It expands the theoretical knowledge of the curriculum to application and real-life situations.

A service learning student at Southwestern College writes how this connection happened for her: "Thanks to service learning, I know who I really am . . . I used to feel useless. I even felt as I wasn't making a difference by attending college, but since my first day as a service learning student, I knew that I could really make a difference for my community and especially, my family." The same student continues, "Service learning helped a lot with my research writing because I pretty much knew what I thought was interesting."

Faculty reported differences in the research papers of students who were engaged in service learning. English professor Kathleen Parrish said the research papers of service learning students "were more engaging, interesting papers . . . students had a feeling for what they were writing because real experiences and people were connected to the research topic."

Southwestern College

Southwestern College (SWC) is located in the southern part of San Diego County, 12 miles south of the City of San Diego and eight miles north of the U.S.-Mexico International Border. The college serves a population base of approximately 350,000 people in a region that is one of the most ethnically diverse areas in San Diego County.

As the only public institution of higher education in the southern part of San Diego county, the population of the college mirrors the diversity of its service area. In fall 1997 the total enrollment was 16,139 students; approximately 79% came from ethnic minority groups. Hispanics comprised 55% of the student body. Almost 25% of SWC's full time equivalent Hispanic students are first generation college students — the first in the family to continue education beyond the secondary level. In addition, English is not the native language of 77% of the Hispanic students of SWC. Many students entering SWC in the fall of 1997 were academically under prepared for college level coursework. Fifty-six percent tested below college level English composition (English 115) and fifty-three percent below the reading proficiency requirement for college graduation at SWC.

In addition to the ethnic diversity, the population base earns less and is less educated than the county as a whole. The SWC's ethnic "minority" population is 60% of the total population as compared to 35% for the county as a whole. The median income

of households in South County is $5,700 less than in the county as a whole. The poverty rate in the district is 15% higher than the county average, and 72% of the residents over the age of 25 have completed high school, as compared to 85% for the county, as a whole.

Background
Southwestern College received a grant from the American Association of Community Colleges in January 1998 to implement a community service learning program at the college. The specific program objectives were to develop and incorporate a service learning requirement in four English composition classes in the spring 1998 semester, recruit agencies for student placement, and develop a stand-alone service learning course. An additional grant requirement was to evaluate the effectiveness of the service learning program. A student evaluation survey adapted from Brevard College was designed to meet the grant requirements and to identify other benefits for students participating in service learning.

A 1996 study of service learning not only verified the valuable links between service learning and academic learning and development of civic commitment, it revealed a correlation between growth in life skills for students engaged in service. In that study, life skills were defined as leadership ability, social self-confidence, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and conflict resolution. "Simple comparisons of Follow-up Survey responses between participants and non-participants indicate that service participants exhibited a greater sense of civic responsibility (e.g. commitment to serving the community), higher levels of academic achievement (e.g. academic self-concept, grades, degree aspirations), and more growth in life skills. Thus, participating in service activities substantially enhanced students' development in the areas of civic responsibility, life skills, and academics." (Gray, Ondaatje, Geschwind, Robyn, and Klein, 1996, p. 5) The Southwestern College study attempts to determine if some of these outcomes have relevance for community service learners in this environment.

Service Learning Definition
The American Association of Community Colleges (1995) defines service learning as "an instructional methodology that integrates community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service learning programs involve students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, and commitment to the community."

Methodology
Research Questions
SWC is fully engaged in the endeavor to increase student retention. Driving this endeavor is a statewide initiative called Partnership for Excellence, which provides California Community Colleges with goals to increase student retention, persistence, course completion rates, and transfer rates. At the same time, the college has established a local retention task force and written institutional goals addressing the same issue. Model practices and examples of achieving these results are being examined. The purpose of this pilot research study was to determine if service learning made a difference for student retention in their English composition coursework. Additionally, faculty wanted to know if and how service effected student learning.

The research questions which guided this study were:
1. Is there a statistically significant difference in:
   A. Personal growth and development
   B. Intellectual development and academic learning
   C. Social growth and development
   D. Career exploration
2. Is there a statistically significant difference in retention rates in English classes with a service learning requirement compared to classes without a service learning requirement at the .05 level?
3. Is there a statistically significant difference in success rates (A, B, or C grades) in English classes with a service learning requirement compared to classes without a service learning requirement at the .05 level?

Sample
All the English 115 courses selected for this study reflect the diverse student profile at SWC. This English composition course is a general education requirement for all transfer students. It also meets the language and analytical thinking general education requirement for the SWC associate degree. For this reason, course enrollment in these sections is typically from 35–45 students per class. The English courses utilized in this study were offered in the same morning to mid-day timeframe with approximately the same number of students.

Students enrolled in eight sections of English 115 were subjects for this study. Four of the English composition courses had a mandatory service learning component and four sections did not. Students enrolled in English 115 with a service learning component were required to do service learning. All these students were advised at the first class meeting about the requirement and directed to other English 115 sections if they did not wish to participate. Within the first few weeks of the semester, students who remained in these courses were provided a list of community agencies desiring students. Referrals were made to senior citizen homes and programs, public schools, head start programs, an AIDS food delivery program, and other non-profits. These students were required to complete at least fifteen hours of service during the semester. Reflection activities for the service commitment were incorporated into the course and took the form of journal writing, essay assignments, class discussions, and research papers. The non-service learning English courses were conducted without a service learning requirement.

The total number of students who participated in the study was 120. Seventy-one (71) students were in the service learning group and forty-nine (49) in the non-service learning group.

Instrumentation
The instrument used in the study was entitled the "English Composition Course Survey" form. It consisted of 29 likert type items, printed back-to-back on one sheet of paper. The items were divided into four categories: (1) Personal growth and development (9 items); (2) Intellectual development and academic learning (8 items); (3) Social growth and development (8 items);

and (4) Career exploration (5 items). See Appendix on page 18.

The instrument was adapted from Reportage-Reflections on Learning, Brevard Community College questionnaire. (Henry, n. d.) The adaptation consisted of adding a "not applicable" response category and adding some directions specific to administration in English classes.

Data Collection
The survey was administered in each English 115 class during a two-week time frame in May 1998 just prior to finals week. All were read the same instructions directing them to "evaluate the learning you acquired in the English composition course." The surveys were administered by one of the researchers.

Data Analysis
Means were calculated for questionnaire responses and sub-means were calculated for each major category of the instrument. T-tests were utilized to determine significant differences between means for each questionnaire item and for the sub-means. Data on student retention from first census to end-of-term and course grades were collected from the College's Management Information System. Chi square tests were used to ascertain significant differences for retention and grades based on participation or non-participation in service learning activities for the total sample, as well as by gender.

Results
Survey Findings
Overall, students who participated in the service learning English composition courses reported a higher rate of agreement on all survey items. On average, they agreed their personal growth and development, intellectual development and academic learning, social growth and career exploration were greater than the students who did not participate in service learning.

Student responses in the career exploration component of the survey were significant for students in the service learning English composition courses. Service learning students significantly "agreed" more strongly with these statements:

- Made contacts for future job opportunities
- Examined — and confirmed or rejected — an intended academic major or career
- Explored potential career areas

One student said, "After a couple of days, I realized that this experience (service learning) could help us in a variety of ways. For example, if I wanted to become a mathematics teacher, I would want to see first if I would like and enjoy teaching. Volunteering as a tutor would be ideal. This tutoring would tell me if I want to continue with math . . . it would also serve as experience in the field and employers would consider my experience a bit more."

Another student would like to teach third grade. She said, "When service learning was offered in our English class last semester, Rolling Readers was one of the choices. I really enjoyed getting in there and working with the kids. It helps me see if this is for me, or can I do this? I just had a great time. You are not just sitting there listening to a child read — you are really

helping them. It's a personal satisfaction that you get out of it."

Instructor, Kathleen Parrish agrees. "They (college students) find out about their community. Their self-esteem shoots up because they can help someone. Dealing with the same students once a week at an elementary school, they get a sense of accomplishment."

Other students shared that service learning gave them the opportunity "to meet new people and find out things about themselves and others that you might not have known before."

Other significant differences in student responses were found in the following survey items. Service Learning students responses indicated they agreed more than non-service learners with these statements:

- Heightened curiosity and interest in the community
- Increased likelihood of continued involvement in civic affairs

In summary, students who participated in service learning were more likely than their counterparts to agree with statements reporting development and growth in all key areas measured by the survey.

Retention and Student Success
Data on student retention and student success were retrieved and reviewed from all eight English composition courses. Retention was measured by a student enrollment count from first census to end-of-term. First census is approximately the third week of the semester. End-of-term indicates the enrollment at the end of the semester. The percentage of students who remained from first census to end-of-term is reported for this study.

Student success rates were measured by counting the percentage of students who completed the course with a grade of "C" or better.

There were statistically significant greater retention rates in service learning compared with non-service learning English Composition courses. The retention percentage for service learning classes was 78% for males and 83.6% for females. In the non-service learning classes the percentages were 65.3% for males and 63.5% for females. These findings reflected a statistically significant difference for females.

The difference for student success percentage rates between service learning and non-service learning classes was minimal. The service learning success rate was 74.4% for males and 88.2% for females. In the non-service learning classes the success rates were 75% for males and 87.5% for females. These rates were not statistically significant.

Conclusion and Implications
This pilot study underscores some of the findings from other more lengthy and detailed studies: service learning has positive impacts on Southwestern College student attitudes about their career development and future commitment to civic responsibilities. Evidence for the positive influence of service learning on retention was also a major finding of this study. Students who participated in service learning were more likely to continue in their course until the end of term. However, there was a curious finding with regard to the measure of student success.

We hypothesized that student success would be greater for

Course Survey — Fall 1998

To assist us in evaluating the learning you acquire in this course, please answer the following questions as completely and honestly as possible. We value your feedback and plan to use it to improve our program and teaching. Information gathered from this survey will be treated confidentially.

Part I
Please fill in the student information section of the scantron with your name, student ID, course title, and section number.

Part II
In the top right section of the scantron, indicate "0" if you did *not* participate in service learning with this class and "1" if you engaged in service learning with this course. Using the following scale, please indicate to what degree this course has contributed to your learning and development.

Personal Growth and Development   Disagree — Agree
1. Increased self-esteem and sense of personal worth.   1 2 3 4 N/A
2. Increased independence, confidence or assertiveness.   1 2 3 4 N/A
3. Increased self-understanding and self-direction.   1 2 3 4 N/A
4. Achieved satisfaction in doing worthwhile tasks.   1 2 3 4 N/A
5. Increased belief in ability to make a difference.   1 2 3 4 N/A
6. Evaluated personal beliefs and values.   1 2 3 4 N/A
7. Increased willingness to take risks and accept challenges.   1 2 3 4 N/A
8. Increased productivity and perseverance in difficult tasks.   1 2 3 4 N/A
9. Explored new responsibilities and accepted unfamiliar roles.   1 2 3 4 N/A

Intellectual Development and Academic Learning   Disagree – Agree
10. Gained or enhanced understanding of course material through a broader range of experience and associations.   1 2 3 4 N/A
11. Improved reasoning skills such as critical thinking, problem solving and decision making.   1 2 3 4 N/A
12. Applied academic knowledge and skills to real problems of everyday life.   1 2 3 4 N/A
13. Improved skills such as remembering, questioning, recognizing patterns, synthesizing information.   1 2 3 4 N/A
14. Heightened curiosity and interest in the community.   1 2 3 4 N/A
15. Gained a more positive attitude toward education and learning.   1 2 3 4 N/A
16. Increased insight, judgment, or understanding of ideas that can't be fully explained in a textbook or lecture.   1 2 3 4 N/A

Social Growth and Development   Disagree – Agree
17. Increased understanding of civic and social responsibility.   1 2 3 4 N/A
18. Developed greater understanding and appreciation of people with diverse backgrounds and life situations.   1 2 3 4 N/A
19. Improved communication skills—listening to others and articulating ideas.   1 2 3 4 N/A
20. Increased ability to work cooperatively with others.   1 2 3 4 N/A
21. Increased knowledge and understanding of community.   1 2 3 4 N/A
22. Increased likelihood of continued involvement in civic affairs.   1 2 3 4 N/A
23. Heightened sense of group dynamics and individual impact in society.   1 2 3 4 N/A
24. Developed a greater understanding of ethical and moral issues.   1 2 3 4 N/A

Career Exploration   Disagree – Agree
25. Explored potential career areas.   1 2 3 4 N/A
26. Developed applicable work skills.   1 2 3 4 N/A
27. Formed more realistic expectations about job responsibilities and situations.   1 2 3 4 N/A
28. Examined—and confirmed or rejected—an intended academic major or career.   1 2 3 4 N/A
29. Made contacts for future job opportunities and references.   1 2 3 4 N/A

Adapted from Reportage-Reflections on Learning, Roger K. Henry, Brevard Community College and All the Difference, Supplemental Guide, Dan Conrad, Minnesota Department of Education.

students in the service learning classes. The SWC findings do not support this conclusion. Student success rates were equal (or in some cases better) in non-service classes. The differences were not in the success rates per se but in the greater numbers of students who remained and therefore successfully completed the course with the service learning component.

These findings, although they support other research findings, are reflective of a small sample of Southwestern College students. There are many other variables which may have influenced the outcome of this study. For example, the faculty who taught the service learning courses are among the "best" of the English department. They wrote the grant that funded this program and may have attracted students who were "better" students looking for "better" instruction. Perhaps the English 115 composition courses are not at all reflective of the "typical" Southwestern College student. Many Southwestern College students are under prepared for collegiate level work when they arrive here. Can the findings gleaned from this study apply to students who are not enrolled in college-level curriculum?

In order to determine the validity of these findings and explore the application of service learning to other disciplines, future evaluations of the service learning program at Southwestern College are planned. In the Fall 1998 semester, service learning has been expanded to include five additional disciplines and twenty new courses. Instead of a mandatory requirement, it is now an option within all these courses. A planned evaluation at the end of this term will compare students within the same course. Expansion of the student sample and courses evaluated will assist in determining if the outcomes of this study are applicable to SWC students in other coursework.

The finding that female service learning students were significantly more likely to remain in coursework until the end of term is also an interesting discovery. There is research indicating women college students prefer a "connected learning" style over abstract "out-of-context learning" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986, p. 200). Could this be why female students participate in service learning in greater numbers? Could it also be that the effects of service learning are greater for women because service learning provides connected information and personal experiences? This finding is worth exploring in future studies.

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Developing Multicultural Citizens

Public schools are the wellspring of our democracy. But we cannot teach tolerance and develop multicultural attitudes from xeroxed sheets; such lessons are learned through direct experience. The ability to live harmoniously among our neighbors of various ethnic and racial backgrounds is achieved when our young are exposed to groups other than their own and work together on common projects so they truly come to know and accept the concept of 'other.'

I can't help thinking that If Common Ground/Common Purpose TM had existed in 1982, when I was dean at an inner-city high school, I would have had a powerful methodology for developing multicultural attitudes among the many different ethnic and racial groups in the school. My students would have worked together to beautify the desolate park nearby, or they might have addressed the issue of a much-needed traffic light near the school, or they might have worked to raise money for a baseball field so they could use baseball bats to hit home runs instead of one another. In 1982, the National Helpers Network, Inc. did not exist as it does today; then it was known as the Early Adolescent Helper Program and was part of the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. Today, it is an independent non-profit organization that has as its mission to make service learning a possibility for all youngsters.

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