

A Relationship for Our Time?: Community College Service Learning's Ties to Civic Engagement

Mary Prentice, Assistant Professor, Educational Management and Development
Department, Las Cruces, New Mexico, New Mexico State University

Abstract

Civic engagement has increasingly become a focus of higher education. One methodology that educators are using to increase students' community involvement is service learning. The results of studies investigating this relationship, however, are mixed. Using a definition of civic engagement that included both political and community-focused knowledge and activities, this study investigated whether community college students who participated in service learning scored higher on a post-course civic engagement survey than community college students who did not. *T*-test analyses revealed that service learners scored statistically higher on the post-course survey than non-service learners. Implications for greater service learning faculty involvement are discussed as an approach to more purposely directing service learning experiences toward the goal of greater student civic engagement.

Introduction

Much discussion about the future of the nation has centered on the perceived low levels of civic involvement of college-aged students (Cowan, 1997). Yet statistics from a recent report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) reveal that young people who have had some college are more likely to vote and to volunteer than those with a high school diploma (Lopez & Elrod, 2005). Putnam (1996), in his investigation of what he believed to be the disappearance of civic participation, found that "education is by far the strongest correlate...of civic engagement in all its forms..." (Education Deepens the Mystery section, para. 15). While the aim of American higher education has not always been to foster citizenship in students, the 20th century increasingly brought the focus of post-secondary education to this goal with educational reformers such as the University of Chicago's John Dewey and William Rainey Harper championing the idea of the American university as the expected deliverer of democracy (Benson & Harkavy, 2002). It is within this context of statistical findings and historical precedence that politicians and commentators have turned to higher education for a solution to the decline in youth civic engagement.

While the focus on developing good citizens has been a secondary goal to fostering academic learning in students, post-secondary educators have also become interested in increasing both the academic learning and the connection to community for their students. One method that educators have turned to in order to achieve both goals is service learning. Since its inception, service learning has primarily been used to increase academic learning through its practical, experiential methodology. Over the last 20 years, service learning has also increasingly been used to foster students' civic commitment to community. Yet, when studied, the results are mixed about whether a connection exists

between service learning and greater civic awareness and involvement. Kirlin (2002) believed that service learning generates positive attitudes toward being involved in one's community, but that it does not, on its own, foster the civic skills needed for students to translate their new attitudes into civic behaviors. Walker (2000) thought that "educators cannot simply assume that service contributes to political engagement" (p. 647). Cowan (1997) concluded that "service leads to service, not to politics" (Lesson 2 heading). Campbell (2000), on the other hand, believed that one way to reverse the decline in civic engagement is to involve high school students in service learning programs so that their social capital increases and thus their civic engagement increases. Owen (2000) linked political socialization of children and adolescents with service learning programs and concluded that "service learning can be effective in fostering politicization" (Introduction, para. 6). Hunter and Brisbin (2000), in their study of higher education students' service learning involvement, concluded that "service apparently has some value for increasing political knowledge and fostering civic responsibility" (p. 626). Finally, Ahmad-Llewellyn (2003) boldly concluded that "...service learning gives students a sense of competency, enhances personal growth, and instills citizenship in a way that no other program can" (p. 62).

In reviewing the research that has been done on service learning and civic engagement, conclusions are tenuous because there are two inconsistencies among the studies. First, the conclusions have been drawn from research on both service learning at the secondary level and on service learning at the post-secondary level. Connections that may exist at one academic level may not be present, or may be differently present at another. Second, among these studies there is a lack of a consistent definition of civic engagement. Some studies focus just on service learning's relationship to increased political involvement, while others include both political and community involvement as the definition of civic engagement, but only look at participation levels and types without considering gains in knowledge about politics or community needs. If civic engagement were consistently defined as including knowledge and activity in both politics and community involvement, then perhaps a clearer connection would emerge. With these ideas, I set out to investigate the possible relationship between service learning and civic engagement in community college students.

Methodology

Survey Construction

As the project evaluator for the American Association of Community College's (AACC) 2003-2006 *Broadening Horizons through Service Learning* grant, I developed a 27 item pre-course civic engagement survey and a 34 item post-course civic engagement survey to assess community college students' knowledge of and commitment to civic engagement after having participated in service learning. The first 27 items were identical in each survey. The content of these items involved various aspects of the students' civic engagement knowledge and behaviors. The additional seven items on the post-course survey were focused entirely on the service learning experience. The pre- and post-test design was important so that I could compare students at the beginning of a semester or quarter, before anyone had participated in service learning, to see whether they were

different in their civic engagement levels before experiencing service learning. If they were dissimilar at the beginning, then any differences that I might find between the two groups in their responses on the post-course survey could be less attributable to service learning than if they were similar. If, however, the two groups were similar at the beginning, and then different after one group had participated in service learning, then conclusions about the influence of service learning would be less equivocal.

The foundation of my conceptualization of civic engagement comes from Gottlieb and Robinson (2002), who defined civic responsibility as the “active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good” (p. 16). To create the survey, I used other civic engagement surveys and a review of literature to construct a set of questions that reflected Gottlieb and Robinson’s broad definition of civic engagement while being short enough for students to complete in 10 to 15 minutes of class time.

Pilot Study

Once the survey was created, Gail Robinson, Manager of Service Learning at AACC, and I piloted the survey in the spring semester of 2003 by asking the 36 service learning directors who had been recipients of previous AACC service learning grants to administer the surveys to students who were participating in service learning and students who were not. Fourteen directors agreed to help with the pilot survey. I received the surveys at the end of the spring term and after analyzing the data, made slight changes to the wording of survey questions.

2004-2005 Study

Beginning in the fall 2004 semester or quarter, each of the eight service learning directors who were selected for participation in the current AACC grant were required to administer the pre-course and post-course civic engagement surveys to at least two classes in which service learning was offered or required and two classes in which service learning was not offered. The 36 service learning directors from previous grants were also encouraged to participate. The results presented here are based on the data from the fall 2004-spring 2005 academic year. By the end of the spring 2005 semester or quarter, I had received 107 matched pre- and post-course surveys completed by students who participated in service learning and 59 matched pre- and post-course surveys completed by students who did not participate in service learning. The surveys represent six colleges: two colleges from the previous grant periods, and four colleges from the current grant. All current grant recipients sent in surveys, but only four colleges sent pre- and post-course surveys that could be matched in that the students who took the pre-course survey used the same survey identifier number when completing their post-course survey.

Results

Demographics

On the surveys, students were asked about their age, enrollment status (full-time or part-time), employment status (full-time, part-time, no employment), whether they were a caretaker for one or more family members, and how often they had done volunteer

work over the past 12 months. Service learners were typically less than 25 years old (71%), full-time students (80%), and part-time workers (61%). Non-service learners were also typically less than 25 years old (78%), full-time students (73%), and part-time workers (44%). Both groups were identical in caretaking responsibilities (73% of each group reported that they had no such responsibility), but students who would soon participate in service learning reported a slightly higher amount of volunteer activity within the previous 12 months (13% reported regularly volunteering and 55% reported volunteering once in a while) than did non-service learning students (8% reported regularly volunteering and 46% reported volunteering once in awhile).

Inferential Analyses

Pre-course survey comparison

Based on these slight differences in volunteer behavior, I compared the two group's responses to the pre-course civic engagement survey questions to see if these groups were already different in civic knowledge and behavior before the semester's service learning began. Using a *t*-test, I found that there was no statistically significant difference, $t(164) = 0.39$, $p = .70$ (two-tailed), $\alpha = .05$, in civic engagement scores between students who were about to participate in service learning ($N = 107$, $M = 6.07$, $SD = 3.15$) and non-service learners ($N = 59$, $M = 5.88$, $SD = 2.79$).

Pre-course and post-course survey comparisons.

To test the hypothesis that service learners would have increased scores on the post-course civic engagement survey and non-service learners would have little or no increase in post-course survey scores, I conducted two *t*-test analyses. The first *t*-test, comparing the non-service learners' pre-course civic engagement scores ($N = 59$, $M = 5.88$, $SD = 2.79$) to the post-course civic engagement scores ($N = 59$, $M = 5.83$, $SD = 3.50$) revealed no statistically significant difference, $t(58) = 0.13$, $p = .05$ (one-tailed), $\alpha = .05$, between pre- and post-course survey scores. The second *t*-test, comparing the service learners' pre-course civic engagement scores ($N = 107$, $M = 6.07$, $SD = 3.15$) to their post-course civic engagement scores ($N = 107$, $M = 6.82$, $SD = 3.43$) however, did reveal a statistically significant difference, $t(106) = -2.42$, $p = .01$ (one-tailed), $\alpha = .05$, between pre- and post-course survey scores.

Discussion

The statistical analyses of the civic engagement surveys indicated that there may indeed be a relationship between service learning participation and civic engagement. My hypothesis that service learners would have increased post-course civic engagement scores while non-service learners would have little or no such increase was supported by the data from this study. While this is encouraging, I am tentative in my enthusiasm as I continue gathering surveys from the fall 2005-spring 2006 academic year. More data from more students at more community colleges will help illuminate whether or not the findings from this study are indeed revealing a consistent relationship between service learning and civic engagement.

Having said that, it is encouraging that when an expanded definition of civic engagement is used in assessing the possible impact of service learning participation, community college students who participate in this pedagogy appear to show an increase in engagement. What is still unknown, however, is whether this increase will translate into sustained community involvement after the service learning experience has ended and the student has achieved his or her post-secondary goals. We also do not know what type of involvement this will be. Some researchers claim that participation in service learning may generate greater numbers of future volunteers, but not politically involved citizens (Van Benschoten, 2000; Walker, 2000). Here is one area where community college educators that use service learning may be able to directly address. Battistoni (1997) spoke to this in his distinction between service learning projects that are philanthropically focused and service learning projects that are civically focused. He believed that the former is based on charity and altruism where those who are more well-off help those who are less well-off, while not recognizing or acknowledging that those they are helping are also part of the community. While the motivations of philanthropic service learning are positive, Battistoni believed that this model fails to focus on the needs of the larger society. Service learning with a civic foundation, on the other hand, “emphasizes mutual responsibility and the interdependence of rights and responsibilities, and it focuses not on altruism but on enlightened self-interest” (The Ethics of Service section, para. 7). He believed that to increase community involvement and political engagement, educators should purposefully structure service learning experiences so that they foster the skills and knowledge needed for students to initially see and then subsequently become involved in their community, both through volunteerism and politics. For students to be able to do this, Battistoni believed that they first need to develop intellectual understanding so that students can “examine the world and understand facts, in order to reach conclusions” (Intellectual Understanding section, para. 15). Educators can structure service learning experiences that foster such critical thinking by purposefully requiring students to examine and critique theories through the actual experiences in the messy world that service learning activities reveal. The other necessary component for a civically-oriented service learning program is the development in students of civic attitudes and participation skills (Battistoni). These would include communication skills such as persuasive speaking and writing abilities so that students will be able to “communicate and deliberate in the public arena” (Civic Skills and Attitudes section, para. 20), as well as listening skills so that students can understand the perspectives of other community members and understand ways to compromise when conflicts arise. Battistoni suggested that the reflection component of service learning provides an excellent vehicle for students to have the opportunity to develop these skills.

In all the areas that Battistoni (1997) suggests are necessary to turn service learning into civically-focused service learning, service learning faculty members are again intrinsic to the development of rich, complex reflective activities where students would be allowed to practice engaging in the difficult skills of respectful discourse and disagreement. If service learning becomes a proven vehicle for student changes in areas other than in the amount of academic content learned, then it will be service learning faculty who will be the catalyst for these changes by being purposeful about demonstrating the creative flexibility of this pedagogy. Hopefully, even with such

tentative results as produced by this study, service learning educators will be encouraged that a relationship between service learning and civic engagement may exist and claim their role in strengthening this relationship.

Conclusion

Deepening students' understanding of the need to be involved in their communities seems to be an achievable goal of service learning. If civic engagement could be viewed as a developmental process, not unlike other forms of learning, then the role that service learning can play in furthering this development could be even more significant. As Morton and Enos (2002) described, students must first be aware of an issue before they can act on that issue. If service learning were to be viewed as a developmental catalyst for civic engagement, then service learning placements and reflection activities could be deliberately structured to impact students wherever they fall on the continuum. Now that service learning has been used in all levels of education and in a multitude of programs and settings, it is beginning to appear that perhaps we have just begun to scratch the surface of what this methodology has to offer. What is left to educators to do, then, is to move beyond using broad strokes to define and design service learning experiences as broadly increasing academic learning and civic awareness (Ahmad-Llewellyn, 2003; Allen, 2003) and into exploring the nuances and subtleties of what this methodology might accomplish when we focus the methodological design on meeting students at their level of community awareness, purposefully connecting them more deeply with their community, and through this, helping them move up the continuum to greater civic engagement.

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About the Author:

Mary Prentice has been involved in service learning for almost 15 years. Currently she is an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program at New Mexico State University and serves as program evaluator for the American Association of Community Colleges' *Broadening Horizons through Service Learning* grant. Before coming to NMSU, she was Dean of Social Sciences at Illinois Valley Community college, where she helped to implement a coordinated service learning program. She began her work in community colleges at Albuquerque TVI Community College as a psychology faculty member. It was through this work that she first began offering service learning opportunities to her students. During her last three years at TVI, she also served as the service learning faculty coordinator for the program. You can reach Dr. Prentice at: Mary Prentice, Assistant Professor, Educational Management and Development, Department, P. O. Box 30001, MSC 3N, Las Cruces, New Mexico, 88003-8001, New Mexico State University, mpreptic@nmsu.edu, 505-646-2962