

# Along the Path to Service-Learning

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## **Abstract**

Practitioners and advocates of service-learning could profit from more critical attention to the motives, methods, and outcomes of community partnerships. This article takes issue with the contention that service is needed as a remedy for student apathy. The political economy of service-learning also reveals the potential for undermining as well as enriching community service. Finally, an overview of service-learning research points to challenges in assessing the outcomes of service-learning.

## **Introduction**

The conjunction of public service with educational coursework, a combination known as service-learning, extends classroom learning into the surrounding community. The call to service may represent a potent collaborative force. Community service agencies develop partnerships with the students who serve, in turn providing important sites for applying theoretical knowledge. Educational institutions begin to dismantle their ivory towers as they increasingly team with public service groups to build greater community outreach. The traditional student-teacher relationship expands to a student-teacher-community partnership.

Service-learning holds the potential to replace other, more destructive means for coalescing communities. William James called for service as the moral equivalent of war for two reasons: to develop character as the soldier matures through wartime and to unify society (cited in Evers 1990, xxxi). James was neither the first nor the last to recognize how war could bind citizens to each other and to their country. A far less respectable figure with more cynical goals, Benito Mussolini (1938), contended that war should be praised and actually sought because it was the only way to create deep, lasting connections among the populace. In times of war, shortcomings of the ruling regime may be overlooked for the sake of national survival and opposition to a common enemy. President George W. Bush's approval ratings skyrocketed

with the declaration of the war on terrorism. Does the connection between calls for selfless service and approval of authority also hold in times of peace? More specifically, what sort of assumptions, procedures, and results lie behind the rapidly growing calls for service in conjunction with higher education?

This article deals with three aspects of service-learning that, if insufficiently considered, can hamper or stifle productive collaboration between students, educators, and communities. The justification for service-learning may stem from misconceptions of students as idle and disengaged from civic activity. Once a service-learning program is established, it may proceed to foster dependency on volunteer labor with attendant reduction in public funding for systemic community problems. Finally, assessing the state of research on the effects of service-learning can prevent overgeneralization from the outcomes of individual service-learning projects. Coverage of these issues proceeds in the context of recommending a foundation for building service-learning programs that have greater potential for providing positive academic and social outcomes.

### **Justification for Service-Learning: Misdiagnosed Civic Apathy**

Some of the strongest arguments for service-learning rely on the premise of an increasingly degenerate and disengaged student subculture, for which there may be some measure of truth. Whether or not the premise accurately reflects reality, it is widely believed. The starkest rendering of this theme suggests that faculty, along with other adults in society, fear today's adolescents or at least their apparent lack of the values that faculty associate with civility and the pursuit of the life of the mind (Hine 1999, 76). As Fox-Genovese and Scanlon observe:

Today colleges and universities are entrusted with the education of notoriously volatile adolescents who enjoy a personal freedom verging on license. The anarchy of social and sexual mores is compounded by the increasing "diversity" of the student population and the anxious academic competition that results from many students' poor preparation and most students' fears about their prospects for employment. (1995, 10)

Although containing a measure of truth, the premise is fundamentally flawed.

What educators perceive as rampant undergraduate apathy and disengagement may be exaggerated and possibly even erroneous. For one thing, contrary to popular perception, the majority of undergraduates are heavily involved in off-campus public service activities, “an astounding 64 percent of them, according to the Undergraduate Survey” (Levine and Cureton 1998, 51). For another, undergraduates closely mirror societal trends in this regard: “In 1993, 89.2 million American grown-ups, nearly half the adult population, engaged in some sort of volunteer activity, for 4.2 hours a week on average, according to the Independent Sector, a Washington-based organization that promotes volunteer work” (“American Survey” 1995, 21). More recent data confirm this high level of activity. The results of UCLA’s 2001 national survey of college freshmen reveal that “82.6 percent of incoming freshmen report frequent or occasional volunteer work, compared to 81 percent last year and a low of 66 percent in 1989. Contributing in part to this rise is the requirement of community service for graduation from many high schools, which has increased from 23.2 to 28.2 percent since the item was first asked in 1998” (UCLA Higher Education 2002, n.p.). While participation in mandatory service hardly signifies a civic spirit, it does indicate that college students have some acquaintance with volunteer activities and are not totally withdrawn from their communities.

The problem seems to be perceptual. Student involvement in community service has become less conspicuous because it is happening off campus and beyond the sphere of influence of academic institutions, thus provoking faculty and student-life personnel into fits of anxiety. Many students have, in effect, rejected traditional collegial relationships with faculty, and with other students for that matter, and have reverted to the nineteenth-century practice of organizing their own extra curriculum independent of professional interventions by faculty and student-life personnel. Because faculty feel marginalized and threatened in a hostile academic environment of contracting job markets and flat enrollments, service-learning can—and in some cases

has—become an attempt to reassert not only the relevance but also the dominance of the academy in students' lives. Indeed, the same UCLA survey that measured greater student volunteerism also registered "record levels of academic disengagement," indicated by the highest recorded numbers of students reporting boredom, tardiness, and non-attendance (UCLA Higher Education 2002, n.p.).

Failure to consider the reasons behind supposed civic detachment and the relative inattention given to community obligations has painted a picture of rootless and directionless students, dissociated from any causes that transcend personal pursuits. The perception of disengaged students renders them as passive spectators, couch potatoes who stare blankly at civic life. According to this position, students resemble the open-mouthed viewer of ubiquitous television talk shows, watching other people's lives, rarely invoking the need to prevent or cope with the personal tragedies and dysfunctions that fill the television screens. So the spectators watch, await the next dramatized crisis, and do not mobilize on behalf of the proclaimed victims in the public parade of suffering. Such a caricature of today's students is not only unflattering, but it is also misguided.

Robert Putnam's (1995) well-known complaints about the decline of civic involvement may reflect changing demographics rather than retreat from public responsibility. As Pollitt (1996) observes, the organizations and activities Putnam uses to measure civic activity fit more neatly with 1950s ideals than with contemporary Americans. While participation in bowling leagues might have declined, the blue-collar, beer-drinking boys at the alley have been replaced by van-driving soccer moms. Thus the civic apathy Putnam diagnoses may result more from the ways he chooses to measure activism than from an absolute decline in voluntary associations. The decline of league bowling, for example, may chronicle progress in redefining social relations: "The bowling story could be told as one of happy progress: from a drink-sodden night of spouse avoidance with the same old faces from work to temperate and spontaneous fun with one's intimate friends and relations" (Pollitt 1996, 9).

Mere civic participation, however, is not enough. The fact that students participate in service-learning is not enough. To accomplish pedagogical objectives, service-learning must include a reflective component that affords students the opportunities to connect their service with the subject matter they are studying. Some research indicates that the reflective activities—be they journals, discussions, etc.—accompanying service-learning are essential for students' emotional and intellectual growth (Waterman 1997). More specifically, service-learning absent reflective activities actually *reduces* students' sense of responsibility to others, commitment to the community, and perceived relevance of service to academic coursework (Bradley 1997). Thus service-learning should be distinguished from volunteer work wherein students invest time without connecting their service to their own reactions and to their educational objectives.

### **Motives and Methods: The Political Economy of Service-Learning**

Before service-learning per se emerged as an educational trend, debates raged over whether some form of service should be required of students. These early discussions deserve reconsideration, since they raise important concerns about the economic implications of service-learning. Some supporters of national service frame their endorsement as a way to aid or substitute for government measures to address "unmet social needs" (Evers 1990, xxiv). One corollary of this argument is that government expenditures for social programs could be reduced without concomitant reductions in services as long as the spending cuts are offset by infusions of labor from volunteers. Some of the altruistic justifications for service-learning do contrast giving with political activism, denying that service should seek to transform society. This argument maintains that with adequate contributions of service, governmentally sponsored social programs become less necessary because social needs can be met through volunteerism (Kahne and Westheimer 1996).

Some critics of mandatory service initiatives, among them Milton Friedman (cited in Evers 1990), claim that any attempt to compel ser-

vice, such as embedding service requirements in courses, could threaten student willingness to contribute voluntary service to their communities. Friedman's fears have not been borne out, since service-learning does not seem to have reduced volunteerism per se. Another danger lurks, however: transformation of the caring professional into the professional caregiver and the overreliance on volunteers accompanied by the attenuation of indigenous social support networks. Service providers who are fulfilling mandatory academic requirements could give a distorted appearance of ameliorating the effects of long-standing community problems, thereby replacing or devaluing the neighborliness that often generated indigenous solutions (Finn and Vanourek 1995). Some observers also contend that compulsory service resembles court-mandated punishment because outsiders are inserted into a community and charged with improving it ("American Survey" 1999). Retribution, rather than real interest in community, is a poor motivation for service.

If social problems can be ameliorated through volunteerism, then the presence of abundant student labor also reduces the need to frame an official, institutionally sanctioned response to the social problem being "volunteered away." Not only could volunteer-based efforts reduce the perceived significance of social problems, but the problem can escape official recognition and prioritization. Thus politicians and activists may dismiss the need to discuss many social problems because "grassroots" solutions are in progress. Having fallen off the official agenda, social problems no longer form a significant part of public discourse.

Going a step further, service-learning could serve as yet another means to wheedle cheap or free labor out of the workforce, forestalling systemic reform by hiding behind the idealistic rhetoric of volunteerism. In short, the servers become servants of prevailing socioeconomic structures. The "servant" mentality also risks skewing the relationship between student volunteers and their community partners. McKnight employs a felicitous metaphor when discussing service-learning. Instead of using service-learning to train professional caregivers for what he calls an "economy of servants," McKnight proposes

that our obligations to others should be motivated by friendship because “[f]riends are people who *know*, care, respect, struggle, love justice, and have a commitment to each other through time” (1995, 177–178, italics in original). By contrast: “Servants are people who *know the mysteries* that can control those to whom they give ‘help’” (1995, 179, italics in original).

Glib celebration of service without attending to the problems service seeks to ameliorate inherently underestimates the significance and systemic nature of most social problems. Volunteer efforts become “mop-up” operations, which are all that is needed to repair the minor flaws in the system, such as the infamous “pockets of poverty” that remained in the 1980s when some politicians belatedly declared victory in the War on Poverty. Educational idealists may push service-learning as a means to change the attitudes of disinterested students toward both learning and service. This line of argument converges in a pernicious way with the claims of social conservatives who deny that the economically privileged should be compelled to live up to the communitarian ideals that they wish to impose on everyone else.

Service-learning may pose a danger of offering an almost limitless supply of unpaid labor for civic and charitable projects, thus (1) devaluing service professions (e.g., social work) by defining it as uncompensated labor and (2) too closely connecting service with credits and grades, thereby not sufficiently encouraging truly voluntary service. Service could become instrumental to the outcome or reward it generates. Service thereby degenerates into servitude to course requirements: service for the sake of a grade, a credit, or just “putting in time” to accumulate the requisite hours. One of the less successful service-learning groups in my classes reflected this “watch the clock” attitude. Rather than focus on the most productive and feasible tasks they could perform with their community partner, this group repeatedly complained that they might not accumulate the required fifteen hours of service.

Some critics have argued that service-learning poses a risk of job displacement. If service-learners could perform many tasks currently performed by paid employees, it would be more economical to rely

on the unpaid labor. This possibility becomes more likely if service-learners infuse labor sectors where the existing labor force is relatively unskilled and thus more susceptible to replacement by minimally trained or temporary workers (Oi 1990). Oi estimates that more than five million jobs could be staffed by service volunteers. He questions the value of such voluntary labor, claiming that organizations would have little incentive to train short-term volunteers (1990). Sometimes organizations are willing to train service-learners, but they lack the resources to do so. If many volunteers suddenly infuse an organization, they may outstrip the organization's ability to prepare or supervise the new recruits (Gardner 1997). This scenario becomes especially likely in rural areas where the student population may exceed the sites available for the desired community partnerships. A business administration professor at my institution, for example, has had difficulty finding enough emergent, local, small businesses in a city of 10,500 to collaborate with his students in developing comprehensive business plans. As a result, he must role-play a small business owner with groups of students who cannot be placed in the community.

Such a situation highlights the importance of gauging not only the need but the infrastructural capability of organizations linked to service-learning. If an organization expresses a need for assistance, that request for aid does not necessarily mean that more is better. Service-learning supervisors should determine the maximum number of volunteers an organization can train and monitor properly. This number might be far fewer than the number of workers an organization wants.

Properly designed service-learning can minimize the risk of job displacement. The argument about job displacement posits a direct tradeoff between service-learners and existing workers. Second, it assumes service-learners would disproportionately occupy jobs that are held by the most vulnerable segments of the workforce. To avoid job displacement, service-learners should occupy positions that would not have been filled otherwise (Moskos 1990).

## **Results of Service-Learning: The State of Research**

Despite the recent surge of research on service-learning, there remains some doubt about whether research on outcomes provides sufficient cost-benefit justifications for service-learning programs (Jacoby 1996). Anecdotal evidence of model service-learning initiatives seems to be the prevailing method of proving service-learning's overall success. Lozada (1998) comments that much evidence for the educational benefits of service-learning projects is anecdotal. Reports of successful service-learning initiatives do offer models to emulate, but anecdotal evidence does not evaluate the learning outcomes of service-learning per se (Chapin 1998). One of the more comprehensive overviews of service-learning, the standards developed at the May 1989 Wingspread conference, employs anecdotal self-reports to support major claims. To demonstrate that stereotypes break down while cultural tolerance increases, the report relies on an unspecified number of student self-reports (Honnet and Poulson 1989). *To Serve and Learn* (DeVitis, Johns, and Simpson 1998), a recent anthology of essays on service-learning, consists entirely of case studies at ten American liberal arts colleges. The Wingspread conference cautions: "Examples are meant merely to suggest possible ways in which to implement the spirit of the Principles" (Honnet and Poulson 1989).

Indeed, descriptions of successful service-learning efforts fill volumes, but it is difficult to generalize from the success of individual programs because every community has a unique dynamic of project recipients, students, and educational institutions. What worked in one environment may not transfer to a different setting where the connections between the institution, students, and community may call for totally different kinds of service arrangements. The difficulty lies in how to extend and adapt the examples to other situations. Every educational environment is unique, and no example from one program should be overlaid uncritically upon another set of circumstances. "The service roles or projects that involve students/youth in service-learning will differ widely, depending upon the age of the young people, the needs of the community, and the specific learning goals that have been

determined” (Alliance for Service-Learning 1995, n.p.). Before transplanting a successful program, implementers first must gauge the local desire for the specific service that would be offered. A wildly successful, model service-learning effort will fall flat if attempted without assessing needs that emerge directly from the community to be served.

The Wingspread conference and other studies previously cited are far from slipshod efforts. Such gaps in evidence speak to the paucity of and need for hard, reproducible data from service-learning projects. The standards developed by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1995) recommend several hypothetical projects, but the organization does not offer empirical data that show these sorts of projects are superior to alternatives. In fact, a press release dated August 1, 1997, stated that a study just initiated by Alexander Astin at UCLA was the “first study of a national scope examining the effects on college students of course-based community service work...” (UCLA Higher Education 1997). As recently as 1997, scholars were concerned that little published data were available to evaluate the effects of service-learning on students (Rhoads 1997). A year later, the prognosis was no rosier. Controlled studies still failed to establish consistent effects of service-learning on students or on the organizations they served (Chapin 1998). Service-learning by its nature resists controlled, generalizable studies because of the wide array of activities that qualify as service.

The research that supports the efficacy of service-learning often invites methodological questions. A literature review prepared for the Department of Education reveals a wide array of methodological limitations.

Few studies have used quantitative methods to explore the effects of participation on students in school-based service programs; none provides results across a representative sample of students. Some studies failed to include any comparison group; others used one but did not control for levels of previous interest and volunteer experience before the program. Few studies recruited volunteers for service and randomly assigned them to control or experimental groups. Clearly, if those who are especially enthusiastic about community service (and who likely have traits that such pro-

grams seek to develop) constitute the experimental group, and less-interested students form the control group, participation cannot explain any differences found afterwards. (Alt and Medrich 1994, n.p.)

Furthermore, the agenda for documenting the effects of service-learning sometimes casts doubts on a project's objectivity. A recent volume, for example, reassures readers that worries about service-learning are misplaced, and the volume is designed to dispel those reservations. "We hope and trust that the fears of more than a few 'doubting Thomases' will be quickly dispelled once they read the highly articulate, sophisticated reflections expressed in this book" (DeVitis, Johns, and Simpson 1998). This optimistic spirit is understandable since the book's objective is to offer models for service initiatives. Perhaps, however, the *failed* service-learning projects can teach as much as—and possibly more than—the resounding successes. Just as scientists seek disconfirmation in testing hypotheses, so should service-learning research more aggressively recognize and diagnose dysfunctional service-learning efforts. Educators and community partners can learn much from the mistakes of their predecessors.

Studies of service-learning also need to beware the potential for selection bias. Typically, accounts of service-learning projects describe only the most successful initiatives, although much could be learned from past mistakes. Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999, 7) employ a narrative approach. Their project collects the "oral histories" of recognized pioneers in implementing service-learning in higher education. The pioneers were chosen by panels who were asked to list significant pathfinders. Although the authors recognize a need to "design a rigorous, fair, and representative nomination process" for gathering participants, they ultimately rely "on our knowledge of the field and on numerous calls to others" (Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999, 8). Such research may be methodologically sound; however, it illustrates the relative lack of clear criteria for defining successful service-learning.

Research on service-learning could move in several productive directions. The civic activity level of service-learners needs to be pre-tested and post-tested to gauge whether service-learning actually corre-

lates with greater civic involvement. While many self-reports from students indicate greater willingness to serve their community, it is less clear whether behaviors are modified. For example, the RAND institution's research on Learn and Serve America, Higher Education (LSA-HE) does document that college students claimed a greater sense of civic responsibility after participating in service-learning. The RAND study cautions: "Because these studies are based on student's [sic] self-reports—the effects students believe the course has had—rather than changes in actual behavior, further research is needed, particularly randomized, longitudinal surveys that capture behavioral in addition to attitudinal change" (Gray, Ondaatje, and Zakaras 1999, 14).

The need to measure actual behavior should be a high priority for future research.

The ultimate test for the impact of service-learning on citizenship is behavior—what college graduates do in their community. . . . The closest we could get to action in the time frame of our studies was to measure intent. In our survey 75 percent of the eleven hundred service-learning participants indicated that they would continue community service during the next semester. (Eyler and Giles 1999, 162)

Obviously, such a result risks a large social acceptability bias from respondents, who basically are being asked whether they learned the lessons their service should have taught them. Intent, however, does not equal performance. Service-learning studies face the challenge to measure behavioral outcomes rather than attitudinal changes. The success of service-learning may hinge on the ability not only to instill an ethic of service, but to catalyze actual student involvement. More longitudinal studies should be conducted to track whether students who participate in service-learning actually do engage in more community service than their counterparts after graduation. Longitudinal research conducted by the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (Astin et al. 2000) does compare college-level service-learning participants to non-participants, although the research reported so far does not track actual civic involvement after college.

Research also should examine how service-learning initiatives can adapt to diverse student populations to maximize their benefits from service. Thus far, very little research has included controls on age, gender, or race (Chapin 1998). Certainly service-learning must take diversity into account, but research has not yet shown which measures would prove most productive. An especially fruitful line of research would be to correlate the experiences of students with the types of organizations they served. By controlling for demographic characteristics of the students, service-learners could be matched with organizations most likely to generate meaningful experiences with those populations. The stakes are large, since more rigorously controlled and monitored studies could help determine “which program elements and conditions are critical to success, or whether certain programs have varying effects across population groups” (Alt and Medrich 1994, n.p.).

## **Conclusion**

The call for more and better research certainly qualifies as an obligatory platitude in scholarly papers. In this case, however, practitioners of service-learning have identified the need for further research as critical to the implementation of successful programs. In UCLA’s 1999 service-learning needs assessment, 70 percent of the respondents identified “increased service-learning research and evaluation” as a high need, tying this item with greater faculty involvement as the two greatest needs for service-learning practitioners (UCLA Service-Learning 1999, n.p.).

Do the challenges in designing and proving the effects of service-learning negate its potential benefits? Certainly not. The first service-learning component I incorporated in my classes drew unanimous positive feedback from student participants, a reaction I had never encountered in any previous assignment. Students clearly see service-learning as an opportunity to acquire and apply knowledge in exciting ways. At its current stage of development, service-learning may profit more from experimenters who recognize and engineer around risks than from cheerleaders who endorse service-learning uncritically. Specifically, service-learning needs to develop a critical edge. The learning

component should include not just career-oriented skills-building but critique of the social, economic, and ideological forces that generate the recurrent need for voluntary labor.

Critical service-learning, informed by the realization that benefits accrue to all participants, levels the perceived status differences that historically have separated higher education from the surrounding community. Indeed, the people being served also perform their own service. Those who “receive” service educate students who perform unfamiliar tasks and become more sensitive to walks of life and problems they would not normally encounter in the classroom. Thus, community can be built without the need for a single, homogeneous public sphere that demands conformity with an overarching social ideal. In short, service-learning contributes to the emergence of postmodern community (Rhoads 1997).

Service-learning can serve important pedagogical purposes within the evolving academy. According to Levine and Cureton (1998), service-learning is useful in college curricula and student-life programs precisely because time-deprived students can fulfill their academic obligations within the context of their ongoing public service activities. The challenge is not that we have on our hands a generation of lazy, disengaged, overindulged students with too much idle time that needs to be filled with socially conscious activities. Rather, students are already too busy to indulge the luxury of a traditional four-year residential college experience, replete with full course loads, student government obligations, and a calendar full of extracurricular activities and cultural events. They cannot meet us where we are (on campus), so we must try to meet them where they are: at work and in their communities, as testified by the proliferation of distance education programs and store-front campuses.

Two important caveats emerge for proponents and practitioners of service-learning: (1) the potential for service-learning to facilitate the unintended and undesirable consequence of trained incapacity—Vebler’s paradoxical notion that education can produce incompetence, and (2) the possibility of producing what Illich calls “specific counter-productivity” or “the specific inverse of its stated purpose” (cited in

McKnight 1995, 8). In other words, service-learning practitioners must guard against the danger of creating either explicit or hidden curricula that have the potential to further erode the social cohesion of communities: “Through the propagation of belief in authoritative expertise, professionals cut through the fabric of community and sow clienthood where citizenship once grew” (McKnight 1995, 10). The risk of fostering dependence on volunteer labor and the need to document the effects of service-learning raise considerations that designers and implementers of service-learning projects should prioritize. As the motives, methods, and results of service-learning receive more careful attention, the relationships between students, educators, and communities can become more rewarding for all participants.

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