

Honours service-learning and civic responsibility

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Abstract

Universities have been urged to prepare graduates for successful professional lives and fulfilling lives as civically responsible citizens. Pedagogies of engagement, like service-learning, are touted as one means to achieve these goals. Connections between first-year experience and service-learning programs have been slow to develop. Further, empirical studies on service-learning in university honours education are similarly scarce. This article examines first-semester honours postsecondary students' sense of civic responsibility before and after completing a service-learning program linking a course on the Evolution of Community to direct volunteerism in struggling schools. Based on pre-post-responses (n=119) to the Level III-Civic Responsibility Survey, analysis of variance with repeated measures showed that participants' sense of civic responsibility was significantly increased over time on each of the dependent variables (i.e., community connectedness, civic attitudes, civic efficacy). Community connectedness scores increased significantly at the .005 level, $F(1, 118) = 9.703, p = .002$. The changes in civic attitudes and civic efficacy scores were extremely significant at the .0005 level, $F(1, 118) = 14.498, p < .0005$ and $F(1, 118) = 23.56, p < .0005$, respectively.

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Introduction

In their delineation of elements that characterise “good practice” in higher education, Gaff and Ratcliff (1997) summarise that curricula and pedagogies that provide active, integrative, collaborative, and engaged learning opportunities, particularly in the “early years” are the best and set the stage for future success. Specifically, evidence increases about the potential of service-learning to ease the transition from high school to college (Furco, 2002) and to help first-year learners cope with the transition to university life (Gallini & Moely, 2003). Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define service-learning as a

course-based, credit-bearing educational experience that allows students to (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Through service-learning, students share “common” experiences and thereby feel connected, and feel like they matter to other students and their instructors (Gardner, 2002). These connections also help to increase student interest, institutional engagement, and retention (Zlotkowski, 2002).

Unfortunately, the first year of college is when students are most likely to turn away from community-based activities, like volunteer service (Vogelgesang, Ikeda, Gilmartin, & Keup, 2002). Drawing on policy analyses of service-learning and character education in primary and secondary educational settings, Schaffer,

Berman, Pickeral, and Holman (2001) found that, to encourage civic responsibility, educational institutions in general must make a commitment to integrate service-learning into their curricula. Institutions of higher education have similarly been urged to return to the public foundations of their work by preparing their graduates, not only for successful professional lives, but also for fulfilling and productive lives as moral and civically responsible citizens (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003; Harkavy, 2006).

Although service-learning’s flexibility of design and instructor-student collaboration philosophy parallel those of first-year experience (FYE) programs (e.g., living-learning residential life programs, undergraduate research mentor programs), FYE and service-learning programs have mysteriously developed in relative isolation from one another, and connections between the two have been slow to develop (Bonstead-Bruns, 2007; Colby et al., 2003; Vogelgesang et al., 2002). Correspondingly, empirical studies on service-learning in undergraduate honours education are scarce. University honours students are academically talented learners who have been accepted into selective, invitation-only programs at four-year postsecondary institutions. Although admission requirements into honours programs differ, invitations are generally sent to students who performed well in their secondary courses, ranked in the top 10 percent of their graduating class, and earned top percentile scores on college admissions exams. In addition to challenging seminars, honours programs often offer students special housing options, personal interaction and research opportunities with professors, peer mentoring programs, social and cultural

events, and access to competitive fellowships and internships.

First-year/freshman year experience (FYE)

Seminars

First-year seminars are considered an effective curricular structure for addressing issues specific to first-year students. Commonly, these more personal, manageable curricular approaches include an introduction to university services, co-curricular activities to connect new students to one another, faculty, and community members, and college academic survival skills (Bonstead-Bruns, 2007).

Seminars are typically small, credit-bearing classes that are applied to general education or elective requirements. In order to increase student-faculty interaction, seminars are designed so that students may more easily develop a relationship with a faculty member and peers. With strong interpersonal relationships, first-year students theoretically will realise that they are not alone in their struggles, confusion, fear, and anxiety, and feel more comfortable seeking assistance when needed (Crissman, 2001). Research has found that students who had taken a first-year seminar reported higher grade point averages, stronger peer support systems, more out-of-class contacts with faculty, were treated like adults, were more academically integrated, had more campus involvement, and tended to use campus resources more because they were more informed (Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995).

Presence and use of service-learning

Some universities have infused service-learning into first-year seminars or introductory courses populated primarily by first-year undergraduates. Echoing issues addressed by first-year programs, service-learning has been touted as a pedagogical approach to ease the transition from high school to college (Furco, 2002). Students are coming to their tertiary studies with backgrounds in volunteerism and already acculturated to new pedagogies of engagement (Colby et al., 2003; Gardner, 2002). Furthermore, the inclusion of service-learning and other experiential methods in FYE came from the realisation that as students, especially non-traditional students, enter college with more and more life experiences, it will be become impossible to maintain the “campus” as the only significant milieu for learning.

Service-learning has also been found to increase retention and interpersonal engagement (Gallini & Moely, 2003). Through service-learning, like other co-curricular activities, students share “common” experiences and thereby feel connected and like they matter to other students and their instructors (Gardner, 2002). These connections also help to increase student interest and combat boredom. First-year students enrolled in required, general education courses often experience boredom (Zlotkowski, 2002) because there is a lack of integration between their academic studies and social lives. Academic integration is proportionately related to the physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to an academic experience (Billson & Terry, 1986). Service-learning requires additional energy and could be an

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approach that institutions can embrace to confront both the problems of retention and student success (Aldridge & Delucia, 1989).

In addition to issues of retention, service-learning in FYE courses serves another purpose. In the past decade, institutions of higher education have been urged to return to the public foundations of their work (Harkavy, 2006). They have been asked to prepare their graduates not only for successful professional lives, but also fulfilling and productive lives as moral citizens (Colby et al., 2003). Unfortunately, the first year of college is when students most likely turn away from service (Vogelgesang et al., 2002). Colleges and universities must continue to promote the values of citizenship, democracy, and civic engagement (Battistoni, 2002), and FYE courses have been identified as excellent venues through which to initiate such value learning, character development, and civic involvement (Colby et al.).

Service-learning in undergraduate honours education

Empirical studies on service-learning in undergraduate honours education are scarce. One reason for this deficiency is the relative absence of service-learning in college honours education. Specific to the United States, in its 2003 Annual Service Statistics publication, Campus Compact reported that only 19% of its responding member institutions had service-learning as part of their honours programs, which had only increased by 1% from the previous year's survey. No data on service-learning in honours courses have been reported from such surveys since.

The few research articles that included honours students in service-learning did not purposefully explain why honours students were chosen for the study and did not explicitly connect literature reviews or conclusions to the development needs of honours students. Undergraduate honours students seem to have been solely a population of convenience in the service-learning literature. For example, Vozzola and Long (2007) examine whether participation in political campaigns constitutes service. Only six female undergraduate honours students enrolled in a service-learning course composed the study's population, but no rationale was provided for this choice. Discussions were not linked back to the honours group. Both authors were faculty associated with the honours program at the institution where the study was conducted.

In contrast to the literature on postsecondary honours education, numerous endorsements of service opportunities for academically talented secondary students have been offered (Bernal, 2003; Higgins & Boone, 2003; Johnson, 2001). These commentaries highlight that if gifted students' potential to contribute is to develop fully, they need to practice their talents in real-world contexts. Empirical studies on this topic (e.g., Keen & Howard, 2002; Matthews & Menna, 2003; Terry, 2003), however, are not generalisable to older, college-level honours populations. With this in mind, and given the unique backgrounds and developmental needs of undergraduate honours students, research on the use of service-learning in first-year honours education is warranted.

Service-learning and sense of civic responsibility

John Dewey (1916) advocated for community-based experiential learning and democratic citizenship. He argued that learning by doing permitted students to bring to life the esoteric concepts to which they were being exposed in classrooms. Dewey maintained that by asking students to demonstrate learning beyond rote memorisation, students would better encode information for long-term retrieval, catalyse personal development by absorbing their experiences and lessons through first-hand experiences, and contribute civically to their communities thereby becoming more responsible citizens (VanWynsberghe & Andruske, 2007).

Civic responsibility is defined as active participation of an individual in the public life of a community, with a focus on the common good (Gottlieb & Robinson, 2003). Several researchers have found that involvement in service-learning fosters citizenship and develops a sense of political efficacy in the students involved (e.g. Drane, 2001; Morgan, 2002; Parker & Altman Dautoff, 2007).

Students who participate in service-learning have shown significant increases in civic engagement knowledge and awareness of societal issues (Melchior & Bailis, 2002), civic engagement and political efficacy (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005), sense of civic efficacy (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Morgan & Streb, 2001), longitudinal civic participation and volunteerism (Gallini & Moely, 2003; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997), and participatory competence – the skills and abilities needed for civic participation (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). From their

study of 1,500 students at 30 universities, Elyer, Giles, and Braxton (1997) concluded that service-learning was a significant predictor of growth in students' belief that they could be personally effective in their community, that they were connected to it, and that the community could be effective in solving its problems, including via the political system.

Service-learning also appeared to increase students' beliefs that citizens should volunteer to serve. VanWynsberghe and Andruske (2007) found that 86% of participants planned to participate in their communities after having participated in service-learning. In contrast, students who had not been involved in service-learning showed little change (Gomez, 1999; Moely, McFarland, Miron, and Mercer, 2002). For this reason, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have concluded that service-learning has the potential to significantly increase civic responsibility. As mentioned previously, however, these inquiries have not yet fully examined the intersection and related outcomes from service-learning in honours first-year experiences.

Research question

How does mandatory participation in a first-semester service-learning program, a combination of enrolment in a symposium on the "Evolution of Community" and direct service in local schools teaching Social Studies lessons, affect first-semester honours undergraduates' sense of civic responsibility?

Methods

Design and sample

To investigate the impact of service-learning participation on first-year

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honours students' sense of civic responsibility, a one-group, quasi-experimental pretest-posttest research design was conducted with 119 first-semester undergraduate honours students enrolled in a service-learning program at a large public research-intensive university. All students were over 18 years of age.

Setting: The Honours College

The Honours College (pseudonym) aims to provide a challenging academic program and a foundation for future achievement to academically talented students by combining the intimacy of a small liberal arts college with the benefits of a large, metropolitan research university.

The College strives to create a diverse learning community that fosters the pursuit of excellence, a sense of social and civic responsibility, and a passion for life-long learning. Students are asked to participate in the learning experience instead of merely observing it, with the aim of developing their intellects in a way that will enhance them as thoughtful, productive, and creative individuals. These aims are succinctly stated in the College's goals:

1. achieve national prominence in Honours education;
2. foster academic excellence, personal growth, and civic responsibility in our students;
3. be the premier program to foster intellectual curiosity, creativity, and undergraduate research; and,
4. become more inclusive and diverse.

The University Honours Program provides a special course of study to the most promising undergraduate students at the university. The program is a four-year

course of studies that requires a minimum of 21 hours of Honours courses. These courses include Honours sections of General Education courses, upper-level Honours courses, and interdisciplinary seminars. Students are also required to attend the Honours Symposium in the semester in which they are admitted. Students who successfully complete the program graduate with University Honours distinction on their diplomas and transcripts.

Context: Honours Symposium and Service-Learning Project

To prepare its students as socially responsible young women and men who fully understand the importance of being civically engaged and to facilitate their smooth transition into college, the University Honours Program sought to engage their first-year honours students in a service-learning experience. Primary and secondary schools were identified as possible partners. These settings were further viewed as positive milieus in which new honours students could serve. Having just graduated from high school, first-year undergraduates were familiar with the school environment, were within the same generation as those that they would be serving, and would serve as academically talented models for younger students thereby supporting the development of their own academic self-image. When asked by the University Honours Program what needs could be addressed by undergraduate honours service-learners, elementary teachers expressed the need for assistance in meeting state Social Studies benchmarks.

Honours students made six visits to participating public schools. The first visit was to orient the university service-

learners, or volunteers, to the school and hosts, and the K-12 students, or service recipients, to their service providers. The remaining five visits were to teach the actual social studies lessons. Total volunteer time was 15 hours and included the teaching of the lessons, visits to the schools, and preparation.

Volunteer experiences were linked to the first-year university “Evolution of Community” Symposium. This course, required of all first-year honours students, examines the historical, cultural and psychosocial development of “community” with a particular emphasis on how traditional notions of community have been defined and redefined in the context of American history. Another focus of the course is on the responsibility of the individual citizen in a democratic society and how the proper exercise of that responsibility is important both for those who contribute to and who receive the benefits of community service. All students meet once per week in a lecture class for two hours with the course instructor and team leaders. The role of group leaders was to help incoming students to adjust to campus and college life, facilitate post-lecture discussions and encourage student involvement, and to lead meaningful reflective activities about service experiences.

For the first hour, all students meet for a lecture by a guest faculty member. Students then divide into their small group led by an upper class honours team leader. Thirty minutes of the small group meetings are used to discuss the preceding lecture and connect it to service-learning experiences and course readings. The remaining time is then devoted to first-year orientation topics (e.g., services on campus, wellness issues, study habits).

Group leaders present topics as well as answer questions from students. To facilitate the socialisation process at the beginning of the semester, each group went on a fieldtrip exclusive of course content.

Several assignments were related to service-learning activities. To ensure students’ understanding of class readings, weekly online reaction postings to selected readings were required. These reactions were to enable students to move to a more critical discussion of their service-learning experiences in the reaction reports. At the end of the semester, students were to complete a summative reflection paper that synthesised their experiences, reactions, and readings across the entire semester and tie these conclusions to civic engagement and school reform.

Instrument

To measure students’ sense of civic responsibility, Level III of the *Civic Responsibility Survey (CRS; Furco, Muller, & Ammon, 1998)* was used. The *CRS* is composed of 24 items related to three clusters: (1) Connection to Community - a student’s feelings of connection to and affinity with a particular community (such as school, neighbourhood, or city); (2) Civic Awareness - a student’s awareness and willingness to take responsibility for meeting needs and problems in a particular community; and (3) Civic Efficacy - a student’s feelings of efficacy in being able to act and to influence what happens in that community. Previous reliability scores of internal consistency as measured by Cronbach alphas for *CRS - Level III* were: overall = .93, Connection to Community = .63, Civic Awareness = .88, and Civic Efficacy = .85. Cronbach alphas for the current study echo previous levels and

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demonstrate a sound reliability for statistical research: overall = .94, Connection to Community = .78, Civic Awareness = .89, and Civic Efficacy = .84.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses were conducted to determine general information about the data. The descriptive statistics were means and standard deviations of the pre-test and post-test scores of the measured variables.

A one-way analysis of variance with repeated measures was then conducted to determine any significance in the changes over time among the honours students on the community, civic, and efficacy clusters. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons of within-group differences followed to determine where significant pre-post differences occurred. Box's M value of $F(63, 3911.47) = 1.57$ ($p < .001$) revealed unequal variances among groups. In this situation, more robust test statistics (i.e., Pillai's Trace) were utilised. All analyses were conducted using SPSS v.18.

Results

Descriptives

Participants' scores on each cluster of the CRS increased over the treatment period. On the Connection to Community cluster, students' mean scores increased by .91 from pre-test ($M=16.50$) to post-test ($M=17.41$). Civic Awareness scores increased from 41.14 to 43.38, for an overall change of 2.24. Civic Efficacy post-scores ($M=40.61$) were almost three points higher than the pre-test scores ($M=37.66$).

Repeated measures analysis of variance

A 2 (measuring point or time) x 3 (dependent variable) one-way analysis of variance with repeated measures on the two measuring points was conducted to study the changes over time of the multiple outcome measures over time. The pre-test-post-test scores on the following three measures were analysed: Connection to Community (PreCommunity and PostCommunity), Civic Awareness (PreCivic and PostCivic), and Civic Efficacy (PreEfficacy and PostEfficacy).

The analysis results confirmed an overall significant difference in between the measures and measuring points (time x CRS) with Pillai's value = .19, multivariate $F(3, 116) = 8.86$ ($p < .001$), and $\eta^2 = .186$. Estimated multivariate η^2 which indicates about 19% of the multivariable variance of CRS is accounted for by changes over time. To determine in which cluster(s) those differences occurred, Bonferroni post-hoc tests were ordered. Univariate results indicated significant changes in each of the three outcome measures over time. Based on the results in the Pairwise Comparisons, there are significant changes over time on each of the dependent variables. Community connection scores' increase was significant at the .005 level, $F(1, 118) = 9.703$, $p = .002$. The changes in Civic Awareness and Civic Efficacy scores were even more significant at the .0005 level, $F(1, 118) = 14.498$, $p < .0005$ and $F(1, 118) = 23.56$, $p < .0005$, respectively.

Discussion

This study aimed to determine how first-semester undergraduate honours students' sense of civic responsibility was affected after participating in a 15-hour required service-learning program. Results suggest that service-learning during the first semester of university studies, as is configured in the University Honours Program, might significantly impact participants' sense of civic responsibility over time. These findings echo previous research that service-learning may offer a promising approach through which to develop postsecondary learners' senses of civic efficacy, connections to community, and plans to engage longitudinally as a citizen. The first-year honours setting offers an additional context under which complementary findings are associated. Acknowledging the role that pedagogical variables may play in affecting outcomes, and discussing human action as situated and contingent on contextual factors, evidences service-learning's potential across differing learning environments and simultaneously complicates its generalisability by limiting the findings only to the context under study. These points are most pertinent to the discussion of the participants' varying conceptualisations of "community" and the assumed monolithic understanding of the term in the validated survey instrument.

First, while the changes in civic responsibility may reflect the pedagogy's strength, definitive and generalisable conclusions are untenable. Findings are based on self-reported data from university students who were required to complete service-learning as part of a university course. Social desirability may, therefore, skew responses. This conjecture is further supported when we consider that

the relationship between the scale, course topics, and assessment foci could be indicative of participant responses' simply satisfying assessment criteria. These concerns should not completely dismiss the extremely significant findings, however. After all, assessment should be tied directly to learning and behavioural objectives. Therefore, claims that there is meddling between the inputs and outputs may be levied against any well-designed pedagogical intervention.

Second, participants do not live in a social, political, or civic vacuum. Extraneous variables can affect the interpretation of the seeming impact of the service-learning treatment, especially as there was no control group against which to compare overtime changes. Similarly, it is assumed that students' activities in the service settings were restricted to their assigned volunteer activities. I did not track whether they spent additional hours, volunteered or worked in other schools, or made distinctions among service-learners' previous relevant experiences and the findings. The nature and amount of additional experiences can certainly inform final outcomes.

Lastly, this study inferred its findings from statistical data over a brief period of time. Outcomes from students' participation are limited to the measures selected and analyses completed. Trying to account for individual psychologies is difficult to capture in a scale. As mentioned above, the use of the *CRS* assumes that respondents' conceptualisation of *community* is the same as is being assumed in the scale itself. Students, especially those in their first-year at university, may be managing multiple personal conceptualisations of lived community, including home, residence hall, university, service site, and university

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city/town. For students in this study, who were enrolled in a course specific to the evolution and history of community, these conceptualisations could have been even further augmented, specifically by the readings assigned and class discussions. For example, honours students may have been exposed to contrasting philosophies of community (e.g., communitarian vs. feminist). It might prove useful, therefore, to consider operationalising the concept for participants in the future as necessary.

Nevertheless, these findings do provide sufficient proof to warrant additional studies on first-year honours service-learning and civic responsibility. The true testament to the potential of service-learning will be clearly ascertained only over a period of time when we can see how participants' sense of civic responsibility manifests longitudinally. For that reasons, time-series studies that follow service-learners over a period of time, especially post-graduation, will more conclusively shape these initial findings.

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