Service Learning and Civic Engagement: Transforming the College Experience

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What is Service Learning?

Service learning is civic, engaged scholarship and concern for social justice that integrates meaningful community service[11] with instruction and reflection.[15] Service learning is a commitment to work and achieve social change beyond the campus boundaries. Service initiatives form partnerships between academic institutions and communities, provide help and support to those in need, and facilitate interaction between students and members of the community.[5] Professors connect service learning experiences to course objectives while the community agency staff ensures that services provided are commensurate with their goals.[17] The benefit for students, organizations, and the university is mutual.[11] Service learning entails collaboration between community, an educational institution, and student learners.[1] Classroom content is fused with hands-on service experiences involving instructor and student voluntary efforts in the community. Professors establish a collaborative process for service that is designed to meet a community-centered goal. The course objectives also reflect services provided and course assignments allow students to reflect upon services and relative academic expectations.[11]

GREEK ORGANIZATIONS

Fraternities and sororities share a bond of ritual, friendship, service and brother or sisterhood. Joining a Greek organization increases students' propensity and intentions to volunteer by 29%.[6] These value-based organizations encourage or require community service, and provide channels for service.[2]

Service learning activities vary from volunteering in homes of people living with disease or donating money to ushering at concerts, supervising tours, tutoring, or helping needy children.[2] Members volunteer to gain a greater sense of awareness. They also develop a better understanding of themselves, their community, and the impact that an individual can have on the world.

Service Learning in Academia:

Goals of American higher education have included citizens active involvement in community life since the 19th century. In 1862, *The Land Grant Act* linked higher education to agricultural and industrial service.[8] Pioneers Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded the Hull House in Chicago, a mediating institution connecting community to colleges and universities. They bridged the divide between service and political activism. Founding figure John Dewey also rallied to link service-learning, education, and experience.[8] Service relationships were defined by opportunity, choice, responsibility, and social need. An individual with opportunity in society could choose to become socially engaged to meet the most pressing social needs.[4] Service would foster community, promote social service, engender reflective inquiry, and make education a part of the social transformation process.[16] In the 1960s, Peace Corps, Volunteers in Service to America, and several regional programs initiated service projects.[10] Programs diminished since service was not integrated into the central mission and goals of institutions where they were based. Service experiences alone could not ensure significant learning or effective service.[16] The *National and Community Service Act* in 1990 and the *National and Community Service Trust Act* in 1993 helped to administer and mobilize Americans into service once again.[10] These acts symbolized a more recent call for an increased commitment of academic institutions to public service.[12] Currently, over one-half of all college students engage in some form of volunteer activity.[5] Studies argue that service learning is a high-impact practice that has a positive impact on retention.[9]

LOCAL SERVICE: SOUP KITCHEN

Caring, Connecting, Changing Lives

Immanuel's House provides 50 to 100 free dinner meals on Monday for individuals in the community. The ministry serves individuals and families facing economic, social, and spiritual instability. They enlist the help of volunteers from the community to help cook, clean, and serve food to individuals. Immanuel's House also offers clinical support for individuals, hygiene kits, and help filling out certification information. They also help the Martinsburg community through donations, fundraising, and worship.

An Academic Tool:

1. Faculty sets goals in **collaboration** with a community organization.[11]
2. Students learn through **observing** others' behavior and attitudes.
3. Journals, group discussion, debates, research, reflection papers, or oral presentations **relate** to service experience.[17]
4. Faculty provide classroom discussion and writing to process cognitive and affective **reactions and critical reflection**.[11]
5. Students use evidence to **link concepts and discuss** what service means academically and in their everyday lives.[11]
6. Service generates new academic perspectives and leads to **maturation**. [17]

Learner Outcomes:

1. **Enhance** academic performance, self-efficacy, leadership, and participation in service after college
2. **Foster** critical thinking, conflict resolution, and cooperative methods[14]
3. **Synthesize** information, creative problem solving, effective communication, well-reasoned decision making[10]
4. **Shape** students as creators and agents actively shaping local and global communities[13]
5. **Engage** in collaborative problem solving to address difficult public issues [13]
6. **Examine** standards of judgment and political views in reaction to observation and interaction[1]

Survey Results:

PARTICIPATION BY CLASS STATUS							
		Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Grad	*Total*
No, not considered	Count	2	1	1	0	0	4
	% Status	14.30%	16.70%	10.00%	0.00%	0.00%	8.50%
No, considered	Count	6	1	3	5	0	15
	% Status	42.90%	16.70%	30.00%	31.20%	0.00%	31.90%
Yes, occasionally	Count	5	4	6	6	1	22
	% Status	35.70%	66.70%	60.00%	37.50%	100.00%	46.80%
Yes, often	Count	1	0	0	5	0	6
	% Status	7.10%	0.00%	0.00%	31.20%	0.00%	12.80%
Total	Count	14	6	10	16	1	47
	% Status	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

ENHANCES INTEREST	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Extremely Unlikely	1	2.1
Unlikely	3	6.3
Neutral	5	10.4
Likely	26	54.2
Extremely Likely	13	27.1
Total	48	100.0

CLASS MORE ENJOYABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Disagree	4	8.3
Agree	35	72.9
Strongly Agree	9	18.8
Total	48	100.0

Findings:

A majority (58%) of participants volunteer actively in the community; 12.5% participate often and 45.8% volunteer occasionally. Upper-class students were more likely to actively participate in service learning projects. A smaller percentage (8.5%) did not want to participate, none of whom were in their senior-year of college. 72.9% reported positive feelings about service learning but one freshmen enrolled in the 200-level course did not believe the experience was useful. A majority also agreed/strongly agreed that service opportunities make sociology classes more enjoyable.

A vast majority of students believed service learning projects were influential while only two upper-class students failed to believe service could influence their opinions or ideological views regarding needy populations. First year students were more likely than others to believe service learning projects do not enhance students' interests in needy populations; three believed service learning is unlikely to impact student perspectives about community issues. All students enrolled in the 400-level course could align course objectives with service learning projects affiliated with their course.

Discussion:

Most participants believed service learning is a valuable teaching tool.[5] A student believed service would have benefited their learning experience. Another said service would better prepare them for working in the community. Very few expressed negative feelings or refused to participate. Aligning course objectives with service may prepare students for service.[17] Study participants perceived a very strong correlation between sociological pedagogy and service opportunities. Senior-level students showed an overwhelmingly greater level of support for service and for having required in-class service assignments. A participant said "students will realize how useful they can be helping others." Conversely, another believed required service learning projects take away the wholehearted effort involved.

Project Overview:

Some universities institute a tradition of serving the local community or have a culture of service on campus. These efforts have been introduced as curricular and extracurricular service methods. Usually, student organizations participate in extracurricular activities of service that involve neighborhood development, community agencies, churches, or youth programs.

More recently, academic programs are initiating curricular service projects as a form of experiential learning for students. These services often meet community needs and simultaneously relate to course material. This study explores the effectiveness of service learning as an activity that meets learning objectives associated with service in sociology courses. The study also considers whether students believe service learning enhances their performance and interest in the subject matter.

STUDENT'S REPORTED PERCEPTIONS OF CHALLENGES

TIME: Outside activities conflict with required courses, employment, and general schedules; transportation to off-campus activities and time management is stressful; no interest in making service a priority.

TRAVEL: Concerned about access to and cost for transportation

COMMUNICATION: Residents will lack interest in volunteers and not want to communicate with students

UNNECESSARY: Students will not take service seriously or be interested; overextending those who already volunteer; students lack skills to react/respond in difficult situations; discomfort

CHALLENGES	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
Time	18	37.5
Travel	5	10.4
Communication	5	10.4
Unnecessary	4	8.3
Missing responses	9	18.8
Total	48	100

Pros:

- Prepares students, assists agencies, and contributes to effective partnering between colleges and communities[11]
- Offers hands-on way of conveying academic knowledge[3]
- Equips students for careers via professional development and networking[3]
- Acknowledges political, economic, and social conditions[11]
- Students experience personal growth (self-efficacy, identity, and moral)

Cons:

- Insufficient planning and resources[11]
- Poor integration of service into course[11]
- Rare acknowledgement of the faculty role in student engagement[11]
- Untrained or underprepared faculty[11]
- Limited student support and guidance
- Student motivations have declined
- Students may believe service is not connected with academic lessons
- Service opportunities are unstructured with a shortage of supervision[11]
- Students left under the impression that service-learning is a waste of time[11]

POINT-IN TIME NATIONAL HOMELESSNESS SURVEY

The **Point-in-Time Homelessness Survey** counts sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness on a single night to identify the severity of an individual's homelessness. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) provides funding to states and organizations to help end homelessness.[7] The survey helps to determine services and assistance programs that help end chronic homelessness. **Zero: 2016** is Homes Campaign designed to end chronic and veteran homelessness in the next two years. Chart 1 is a cross-year comparison of persons in shelters in WV from 2010-14.[18]

WV Sheltered Households and Persons 2010-2014 PIT Counts

(Chart: Sheltered Households, Sheltered Persons for years 2010–2014: 2010: 1194/1524; 2011: 1133/1405; 2012: 1144/1533; 2013: 1067/1612; 2014: 1299/1592)

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18 West Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness (2014). *West Virginia Point in Time Count: Statewide Aggregate Report*, p. 1-7. Retrieved from http://wvceh.org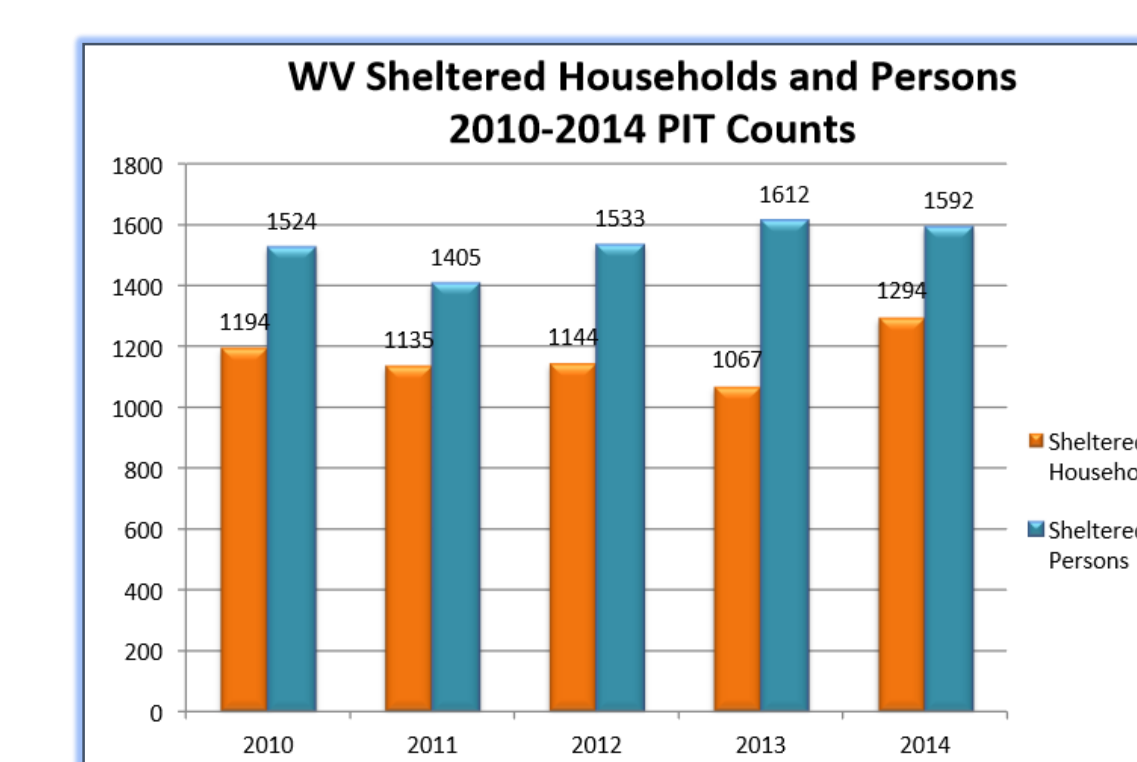/uploads/default/defaultState_PIT_Report_2014.pdf