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## How Volunteer Service Projects Enhance Learning and Classroom Community: A Longitudinal Study

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*This article shares the results of a longitudinal study conducted to assess student learning up to six years following participation in a volunteer service project with undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a first-year seminar class and a first-year master's degree course about college students. Data was collected using an open-ended survey and analyzed for relevant themes. Results are presented with implications for teaching and learning using collaborative volunteer service as a methodology.*

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“Whatever else is involved—improving teaching, developing sensible curricula, creating new forms of governance, providing more authentic assessment, empowering teachers [and students], increasing professionalism—it must rest on a foundation of community-building” (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. xi).

### Introduction

In 2005, in response to a campus-based American Democracy Project initiative and the university’s strategic plan, a group of faculty and staff developed an annual collaborative service learning project to enhance course outcomes by creating purposeful relationships and educational interactions among first-year undergraduate and graduate students and lead to an enhanced sense of classroom community. Courses and programs strategically focused on building community in postsecondary education curricula are shown to cultivate trust, cooperation, and communication; when there is a sense of community, students collaboratively construct respectful and effective discourse and shared learning (Foote, 1998; Stewart, 2008). This volunteer service project relied on building relationships between and among students to deepen the learning of course outcomes and enhance the dialogue among participants.

For this project, volunteer service was selected as the educational delivery method because of the opportunity service provides for genuine interactions and learning occurring when students work together toward a common purpose (Oates & Leavitt, 2003). In addition, volunteer service projects facilitate learning across different learning styles, making the experience meaningful for all stakeholders (Cress, Collier, Reitenauer, & Associates, 2005). For six years, this project annually involved approximately 20 first-year undergraduates enrolled in a one-credit learning community course and 20 first-year college student personnel administration graduate students enrolled in a college student “cultures” course. The primary purpose of the project was twofold: (a) to introduce first-year students to volunteer service in an out-of-classroom setting; and (b) to provide an applied learning lab for graduate students in a student affairs college student cultures class to learn about and develop relationships with first-year students. An additional benefit of this partnership is that the majority of graduate students held positions in student affairs offices on campus, allowing for new first-year students to benefit from opportunities to meet graduate staff and, through their interactions with them, become familiar with campus resources.

Service projects varied from year to year, but the structure of the learning experience (i.e. pre-meeting, small group work teams, group reflection) was consistent. Community service projects included painting, completing yard work, building homes with Habitat for Humanity, providing environmental education, assisting with pet care, assisting at a charitable fundraiser, and landscaping. After each project, students reflected on their experience in small groups comprised of undergraduate and graduate students and were assigned papers in which they further reflected on specific aspects of their experiences. Students over the last three years of the project were also prompted to reflect upon their expectations prior to the event. Professors/researchers analyzed student responses to assess the extent to which learning and relationships with other students took place and assessed the benefits of using a volunteer service project as a pedagogical strategy in first-year transition courses (to learn more about the institution and community) and the graduate student course (to learn more about new college students). Feedback from the students at the end of each semester consistently indicated that the primary learning objectives were being achieved. Overall both the undergraduate and graduate students found the experience positive in nature and thought it contributed to personal growth and provided an opportunity to learn about the value of collaborative service as an activity to build connections and community.

This project ended in 2010, and in 2011 all former project participants were asked via email to respond to questions about the long-term effects of the service experience on their frequency of community service since the project, the

relationships developed through the volunteer experience, and perceptions of the value of the project on their learning. This study uniquely adds to the current scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) literature by providing longitudinal understanding of learning and perceptions of learning of both undergraduate and graduate students, as both concepts are not often mentioned in the literature.

### Review of Related Literature

In this section, we outline the benefits of volunteer service as pedagogy for collaborative learning and the need for longitudinal research on one-time community service projects. In addition, research on collaborative learning and its effect on building relationships and community in the classroom are shared. While the majority of volunteer service learning research is focused on learning outcomes, a gap exists in the area of outcomes-based longitudinal research and the potential effects of this hands-on collaborative learning experience on future relationships or involvement in other volunteer service.

**Service learning.** Current research validates and advocates the integration of service learning pedagogy as a means to promote and improve student learning (Astin & Sax, 1998; Brody & Wright, 2004; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Iverson & James, 2013; Kiely, 2005). Service learning pedagogy is grounded in Kolb's 1984 Experiential Learning Model (Exeter, 2001) and honors the Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice (Billig & Weah, 2008) to provide students in-depth examination of course topics as well as to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between student learning and community development. Service learning assists students in making connections between content knowledge and its application to practice and professional life (Stavrianopoulos, 2008). Research also links service learning for college students to further development in critical thinking (Ehrlich, 2000), cognitive development (Wang & Rodgers, 2006), self-authorship (Iverson & James, 2013), diversity awareness (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000), and values commitment (Rhoads, 1997). Extensive research focuses on the role, function, and immediate benefits of service learning; however, little is known on the lasting effects of this hands-on and community integrated learning experience (Kiely, 2005).

**Longitudinal research.** The few longitudinal studies on service learning (i.e. Kiely, 2005; Keen & Hall, 2009) are supportive and insightful of the transformative learning produced by this pedagogy, particularly when dialogue across or about difference occurs. Students are asked to engage more fully in hands on service learning experiences and, as a result, are more likely to learn more about themselves and others. As such, our longitudinal study sought to explore what students remembered up to six years after engaging in a volunteer service project embedded in two courses.

**Community building as a teaching strategy.** Community building is defined as "the activities, practices, and policies that support and foster positive connections among individuals, groups, organizations, neighborhoods, and geographic and functional communities" (Weil, 1996, p. 482). What is often left out of definitions of community building is a *relational* component of teaching and learning in classes that take a community-building approach. Relationships formed and forged through coursework that build an active, engaged community of learners may be more lasting than the activities and policies (such as small assignments and syllabus protocol) that constitute the more rigid conventions of grading and routine class mechanisms. As Bergquist (1998) observes, "New conditions force people to think in new ways and break out of old thought patterns" (p. 97). Building community requires being open to new conditions and co-constructing a world of sharing, vulnerability, and critical curiosity.

Recent inquiry into the outcomes of community-building pedagogy inside and outside of the classroom suggests that community building is integral to student success (Cohen, 1995; Nicholas, 1997; Raywid, 1993; Rule & Kyle, 2009), as well as contributive to active learning and student self-reliance (Foote, 1998). In Tinto & Love's (1995) longitudinal study, students in learning community programs demonstrated higher persistence rates and an increased appreciation/value of peer collaboration, working in groups, and diversity compared to students not involved in learning communities. More broadly, community-building initiatives can positively affect people's lives in the larger constituencies touched by

the partnerships and relationships that emerge from such shared endeavors (Kingsley, McNeely, & Gibson, 2000; Beck, Newton, & Maurana, 2002). For Nicholas (1997), “Community . . . functions as a laboratory where its members can experiment and gain new experiences from which they may extract new wisdom” (p. 198). Noonan (2004) also found community-building activities to be significantly effective tools in creating a classroom climate conducive to learning.

It takes a group of co-learners who are open to new perspectives for community building to occur, whether in the classroom or in the field. The development of community requires building relationships with people of diverse worldviews, backgrounds, and educational experiences. These collaborative volunteer service projects, conducted over six years with 200 participants, provided an opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students to work together and learn from and about each other.

### **Methodology**

Multiple sources of reflection were used throughout this project to understand and analyze student learning and outcomes of the project each year, but in this paper we only focus on the longitudinal data for this study. As a point of reference, reflective papers, pre-service expectations, class discussions, journal entries, and narrative comments from course evaluations were used as sources of data to assess what learning outcomes students reported immediately following collaborative service experiences. For the longitudinal aspect of the research, a short open-ended assessment instrument was developed that asked students to consider what about the service experiences they recalled and whether any significant learning from the project was retained over time. Students reflected on the projects anywhere from one to five years following their participation in one of the different collaborative service projects.

The questions in the longitudinal open-ended survey asked about: (a) students’ service and volunteer experiences both prior to and after the service project; (b) what they recalled learning about themselves and others as a result of participation in the service project; and (c) how the project affected their learning about the value of service and specific needs in the community. These questions paralleled the types of prompts students were given to write initial reflections and that were used for class reflective discussions. Survey data were analyzed by reviewing written responses and then grouping those by common or reoccurring themes (Merriam & Associates, 2002). As an additional part of the data analysis, comparisons between the themes from students’ collective original responses and the responses to the longitudinal survey questions were made using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). There was no attempt to assess individual student learning over time as the longitudinal surveys were anonymous and there was no way to connect the survey response with specific reflection papers or pre-service expectations submitted originally.

Over the six years, approximately 200 first-year and graduate students participated in the collaborative service projects. The open-ended survey was sent via e-mail to every student for whom a valid e-mail address was available (n=158). Eighty-six former participants (54%) returned usable, completed surveys.

### **Results**

Participation in the longitudinal study provides a good sample of the original project participants by year. Of the 86 survey respondents, 38 (44%) had been first-year students enrolled in the freshman class and 48 (56%) were graduate students enrolled in the college student cultures course. The distribution of survey respondents across the six years is fairly uniform, as shown in Table 1, with those who completed the course two to four years prior with the highest response rate.

Table 1: *Numbers of Undergraduate and Graduate Student Participants by Year*

Year of participation	Number of undergraduate students	Number of graduate students	Total number of participants
2005	3	7	10
2006	6	7	13
2007	7	12	19
2008	9	9	18
2009	12	9	21
2010	0	3	3
Unsure	1	1	2
Totals	38	48	86

Data for each of the seven survey items were imported into Microsoft Access and sorted by course, either freshman or graduate, for further analysis. In addition, all survey responses were separated by prior level of involvement in service-related activities, either as an undergraduate student (for the graduate students) or in high school (for the first-year students).

#### **What did you remember about the service project?**

As students participated in these activities up to six years prior to being surveyed, the first question asked related to what each student recalled about their experiences. Most graduate students recalled first the relationships that were developed, enjoying the personal connections they were able to make with other students in the first-year student class, but also better relating to students in their own graduate class. “I think it is a great idea to pair up two different classes and academic programs to interact with one another and collaborate in an effort,” said one graduate student. Since these projects took place during the first few weeks of the fall semester each year, students barely knew their classmates, much less students from the other class. As another graduate student responded, “I enjoyed being paired up with people I did not know and then getting to know them. We all worked together and really enjoyed ourselves that day.” Undergraduate students also mentioned building relationships and getting to know students in their own class as something that was memorable. “It was a good time to really break through nonsense conversation with the fellow students and really get to know people. I still hang out consistently with two friends that I met in [class].”

Students from both classes reported learning more about the value of service to people in the community who were helped. This finding is also consistent with responses from earlier research that was conducted about these projects (McCluskey-Titus, 2008; McCluskey-Titus, Hallsten, Troxel, & Pearce, 2010). “I learned that helping others is something I really care about and is part of the reason I am becoming a teacher,” said a first-year student. A graduate student remarked, “In the end, I guess I learned that helping others can change people’s lives no matter how big or small . . . and that there was a bigger need in the community that I ever would have thought.” In terms of feeling that their work was valued, one student shared that “The thing I remember most about the service project was the high level of gratitude that we received from both students and faculty at the high school.”

#### **What did you remember about working with your classmates?**

Graduate students recalled working collaboratively with another classmate to develop relationships with undergraduates while working in teams of four students (two graduate and two undergraduates per team) and providing leadership for the smaller work teams. “I remember working together and collaborating [with my graduate student partner] to figure out the most efficient way to finish (painting) the hallway. It was nice seeing my classmates out of the classroom working together,” offered one graduate student. They again mentioned how much fun they had interacting with students in their own class and with the undergraduate students while working together. “I remember bonding with others that I wouldn’t have done otherwise,” said one graduate student, “I felt a sense of coming together as a group and putting our efforts together to help people out.” Another shared that “the project was a great experience to meet new people and have a chance to talk with my classmates in a non-traditional setting. It was my first real communication with my classmates socially.” It is clear that the social relationships developed during the project were, and continue to be, a significant aspect of the overall project.

While the graduate students’ responses focused on building relationships with both students in their class and the first-year class, the first-year students shared that they enjoyed getting to know students in their own class specifically. “I remember coming together with a bunch of people to do a good thing for someone else. We all worked together and really enjoyed ourselves that day.” A comment that was particularly interesting was also made by an undergraduate student: “I had never really talked to anyone in the classroom and at the service project we were laughing and talking like we had known each other for a year and it was good.” The undergraduates also commented on the teamwork that was required to work together on the projects. One student recalled, “. . . seeing people come together to help and participate in such a charitable event was an amazing thing to be a part of.”

### **What did you learn about yourself?**

A common theme expressed in the responses are that graduate students felt compelled to participate more actively in service activities after completing this project. “I learned that I wanted to actually be involved in the community where I live and go to school.” They also expressed a need to work harder to make connections with others not in their own class. Some expressed satisfaction working as a part of a team and helping others. “I like doing service, but don’t have enough time to commit to it. It felt great to get back into service again and I learned that I work well in groups and teams.” Some shared that they learned how important bonding with others was to their own satisfaction as well as the success of a project. “I realized how much you can learn about people and about how service really makes everyone enjoy their life more.” As future administrators, graduate students recognized their roles in offering informal leadership to get the job done. One graduate student shared, “Honestly, what struck me most is . . . the expectation for us to set the standard as leaders . . . [we were] held to a high standard of integrity and I tried to live up to [that] expectation in all that I do.” Another student remarked, “I learned how much I enjoy doing service and how I don’t mind just being a participant [and not having to lead] in order to enjoy [the experience].”

The first-year participants indicated they learned that they found volunteering meaningful and fulfilling. “I learned that people from all walks of social groups could come together and work on a service project, and come out friends in the end,” said one first-year student. Another commented, “. . . I learned that giving back to the community is very rewarding and is fully appreciated.” A few also expressed that they learned the value of one person helping out that could make such a big difference in the lives of others. “There is always something that I can do, no matter how big or small, that can help and contribute to someone or something,” one stated.

### **What did you learn about students in the other class?**

While there was some self-learning expressed by survey participants, there was a greater recollection of learning about other students participating in the collaborative project. As future college administrators, many of the graduate students shared how much they enjoyed working with the first-year students and how different these students were from how

they remembered themselves as new students in college. “I learned about other people, and their history with volunteering. We talked about our passions and what we really care about doing in life which was nice to see.” Several expressed that the undergraduates were more reserved than they expected. A few graduate students saw that some first-year students were excited to be working on the project and some were not. “I also learned that there were some students who could care less about helping others because they did not show up or did not participate.” However, there was also a feeling of surprise at how involved some of the undergraduates were in service activities prior to coming to college. One graduate student recalled “how excited (the undergraduate) students were to help. Everyone was so eager and enthusiastic!”

There was a feeling of equity expressed by the first-year students about how similar they were to the graduate students in terms of willingness to be involved in service projects and being helpful. “They (graduate students) were into volunteering, just as we are. They really enjoyed it,” said one former freshman participant. A different first-year student stated, “The other students that participated were graduate students. After participating in the project I had learned that we too are very similar. The only differences were age and our educational status.” The teamwork required to complete a successful service activity was evident in some of the comments made by undergraduate students. “Even the silliest, fun, and small opportunities could have a great outcome. It only takes one person to help out and make a difference, but a group of people can change lives. We raised a lot of money that day (at the bags tournament) and I am excited to have been a part of it.” The first-year students also expressed that graduate students were passionate about their chosen careers, which they willingly discussed together.

#### **How beneficial was this assignment in learning about the community?**

Most students reported that this assignment was “somewhat beneficial” in understanding the needs of the community where they attended college. Some who worked on a more community-oriented project appreciated the opportunity to meet and interact with local residents involved in volunteerism or people served by the organizations. One undergraduate student reported, “I remember most meeting some of the people from the group homes and seeing their appreciation towards what we had done for them.” These projects also introduced students to some of the challenges facing this community, and as one first-year student reported, “It was amazing and sad to see that a world existed outside of meal points and essays. I thought my life was beginning to become difficult with homework and what not, but it was an enormous wake-up call.”

#### **How have you been involved with volunteer service since this project?**

Graduate students who were active or somewhat active in service-related projects as undergraduate students reported being very active or somewhat active in volunteerism since being involved in this project. Common activities where they volunteered included helping with Habitat for Humanity projects, participating in activities associated with a religious institution, getting involved with alternative breaks for college students, engaging with national sorority/fraternity organizations, and organizing or participating in fundraising activities for specific charities such as St. Jude. Graduate students who reported little civic engagement as undergraduates tended to not continue with service-related projects after this one was completed.

Undergraduate students who were actively involved in volunteer activities during high school also reported continuing with that involvement after this project. Their service activities included Habitat for Humanity, service-related organizations on campus, and sorority/fraternity philanthropies. One student reported, “For me personally, this service project sparked a lot of great things in my life! It really made me realize how special service is and sparked something inside of me I’ve never seen since high school . . . Passion!” Students who were somewhat active in high school reported either remaining somewhat active after the project, or became very active in service-related activities. As with the



graduate students, those undergraduates who had not been involved in high school tended to not become involved after this project.

### Implications for Teaching and Learning

The responses from students up to six years after their experience with this project clearly indicate that the most valuable part of this paired class volunteer service project was the opportunity to collaborate with their classmates and students in the other class and build strong relationships over a shared service experience. This is similar to findings in Keen & Hall's (2009) longitudinal research study that found continued interaction between students in classes where a service component was part of the curriculum. Instructors who want to develop an engaged and connected learning community within a class can use collaborative class activities or assignments, like this volunteer service experience, early in the term to establish the sense of community. "I never really became good friends with any of [the class] but we did team together on another [class] project and worked well as a group," reported one first-year student. This finding is consistent with Tinto and Love's (1995) work indicating students in learning community programs demonstrate an increased appreciation/value of peer collaboration, working in groups, and diversity compared to students without such experiences.

Students did indicate slight changes in personal ideas or values through their involvement in the projects, which confirms earlier findings by Rhoads (1997) that students can acquire a "caring self" identity through participation in collaborative volunteer service. Instructors can use a similar volunteer service project in courses where the content is value-laden or where students would be asked to reflect on, verbalize, or apply their own beliefs, such as in philosophy or business ethics. Participating in a required collaborative service project as a class allowed students the opportunity to consider what is important to them and how they might contribute positively to addressing needs in their community. "Through participation in this project I learned that giving back to the community feels very rewarding and is fully appreciated," said one student. "I have been blessed with so many things and it is my duty as a person to help the less fortunate," another remarked.

The nature of these projects varied from year to year, but when projects were done without contact with the people being helped some students expressed they would have preferred more connection to people who were served through their work (i.e. direct service). This is consistent with the theme of building relationships that was expressed by participants throughout the study. "Landscaping makes an overall appearance nice, but I would rather have a personal connection to helping a student out within the school," noted one participant. In coordinating a volunteer service project, instructors may want to consider whether interacting with clients would meet the proposed learning outcomes of the project or the class. In an education or social work class, students may prefer a direct relationship with people they are assisting, whereas in a class where the project is primarily intended to help build a team or to learn a skill, then direct contact with project recipients may not be appropriate or even possible. This expressed desire for client contact could connect to students becoming more sensitive to diversity or diverse backgrounds, as reported by Boyle-Baise and Kilbane (2000), and courses with a focus on social justice or the perspectives of marginalized populations could use this teaching methodology with success.

A benefit of using volunteer service projects within undergraduate or graduate-level courses comes when introducing class concepts related to diversity or social justice (Keen & Hall, 2009; Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000). Challenging issues like hunger, affordable housing, child care, mental illness, disaster relief, or environmental sustainability can be better addressed when witnessing the needs and community responses firsthand rather than from a solely intellectual viewpoint. Students reported deeper understanding of these types of issues when they actually engaged in projects that helped rectify challenging problems at a local level. One student shared, "This project helped me see outside of campus. It helped me take a glance at what was happening around me and with the people living in the community. It increased my awareness of certain issues that exist in our community that I may or may not be aware of and may want to learn

about or potentially help with.” When service projects are used along with course material, learning is more powerful as described by another student, “This [project] helped make a well-rounded class because you were learning about your community, then you get to help the community you learned about through service.” More broadly, community-building initiatives can positively affect people’s lives in the larger constituencies touched by the partnerships and relationships that emerge from such shared endeavors (Beck, Newton, & Maurana, 2002; Kingsley, McNeely, & Gibson, 2000).

The longitudinal data indicate that instructors who intend to incorporate service into their class will want to carefully consider the intended outcomes of the class and whether a volunteer service activity can help students achieve them. Students should be educated as to the purpose of using service learning as a pedagogy as well as given information about service sites and potential needs within the community. Partnering with existing community service agencies allows an instructor access to staff who can assist with training and provide tools needed to perform the work. Students would then also have the option of continuing to volunteer with that agency if they felt compelled to do so. “Since this project, I have been working with the athletic department more and helping out at various community service projects throughout the town,” said one undergraduate student. One of the graduate students shared, “. . . [I] participated in three different Habitat for Humanity builds and a dance marathon which raised over \$1.7 million for [a children’s hospital],” even after she left the campus and took a position at another university.

### Conclusion

Based on the review of literature, it was expected that students would report development of critical thinking or cognitive development skills (Ehrlich, 2000; Wang & Rodgers, 2006) as a result of involvement in a collaborative service project. These skills were not mentioned directly by students in their survey responses, and perhaps that is because this was a one-time project associated with one class, and the service occurred up to six years prior to when the students responded to our survey. That does not mean, however, that learning activities such as this one do not have merit as community building practice and pedagogy, as students did report learning about themselves, building relationships with others, and learning about how valuable their assistance was to people who were helped in the community. In fact, it is significant to note that even though this was a one-time project, the response rate to this request for reflection for both the former first-year undergraduates and first-year graduate students was impressive. This active interest in providing feedback leads us to conclude that for many, the experience was memorable and lasting. When considering the value of service learning to a specific course, keep in mind the intended learning outcomes, the connection to class material and community needs, the team relationships that students can develop among themselves and perhaps with the local community, and exposure to social justice issues in a practical sense so that learning and relationship building can be maximized.

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