

Articles

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College Students' Attitudes toward Service Learning in Northwest Indiana

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Service learning in higher education is designed to enhance student learning, to increase student engagement in the local community, and to promote faculty participation (Jacoby & Associates, 1996). Service learning projects have been shown to help participating students: (a) develop skills that are essential to their professional and personal lives, (b) contribute to the civic well-being of their local communities, (c) receive guidance and experience for future careers, and (d) improve their understanding of academic course content by bridging theory and practice (Campus Compact Resources for Community Colleges, 2008; Center for Service and Learning at Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis, 2008; Conner, 2004). To promote these benefits, service learning activities have been introduced and encouraged at a public, Master's degree-granting institution in Northwest Indiana. At this institution, service learning activities have included a number of community partners, including the Boys & Girls Clubs, local school corporations, Northwest Indiana Community Action Center, United Way Agencies, and YMCA (Annual Report of Service learning, 2008).

However, university faculty members who have incorporated service learning activities into their courses have encountered some resistance from students. Students who are employed at full- or part-time jobs cannot easily fit service learning hours into schedules that are already crowded with classes, work, and family responsibilities (Donovan, 2008). Knowing that many students work and anticipating resistance from students, some university faculty express reluctance to include service learning requirements in their courses. Consequently, the investigators were interested in discovering the extent to which the work responsibilities of currently-enrolled students do in fact operate as a barrier to service learning, and the extent to which students who are employed at full or part-time jobs value service learning differently than students who do not work. By focusing on these factors, the investigators sought to understand better the attitudes of urban university-level students toward service learning and civic engagement.

Review of Literature

Potential difficulties for university-level students to allocate time to service learning has long been a concern of scholarly research (Parsons, 1993). Recent studies have found that scheduling conflicts are a source of difficulty for students in completing service learning requirements (Conner, 2004; Weglarz & Seybert, 2004). Working students, in particular, report that they encounter difficulties in scheduling service activities with local community partners (Hughes, 2002; Piper, DeYoung & Lamsam, 2000). Based on their research, Sather and Reed-Bouley (2007) concluded that students' employment—necessary to support their pursuit of higher education—made it harder for them to participate fully and effectively in activities related to coursework, including activities such as service learning. Among university-level students, a major concern raised consistently about service learning is whether or not they will have sufficient time to complete required hours, activities, and assignments (Shiarella, McCarthy, & Tucker, 2000).

Students' perceptions of the practical feasibility of service learning are consequential for institutions of higher education that serve commuter-student populations. In Hughes' study of community college students (2002), the participants reported that time, family, and job responsibilities were the main reasons why more students could not get involved in service learning activities, even though they recognized the value of such activities. Similarly, in a recent study, Peters (2011) identified perceived time constraints as a major consideration in students' resistance to service learning. At the investigated institution, many students reported difficulty juggling the demands of conflicting work, family, and service obligations. However, Peters also found that despite their busy schedules, all of the students who participated in service learning found sufficient time (little to enough) to complete required activities.

University-level students' perceptions of the demands placed on their time by service learning may operate as a major source of resistance to service learning. Butin (2006) has argued that service learning is a pedagogy designed for traditional students, those who are "White, sheltered, middle-class, single, without children, un-indebted, and between ages 18 and 24" (p. 482). In light of the changing demographics of higher education, a large and growing proportion of the postsecondary population "views higher education as a part-time, instrumental, and pre-professional endeavor that must be juggled with children, family time, and earning a living wage." For such students, service learning may be perceived as "a luxury" that they cannot afford (p.182). Perceptions of this kind are of particular concern for institutions of higher education, such as the one at which this study was conducted, that draw a commuter-student population from economically and socially diverse urban settings. A typical concern is that students may be less reluctant to enroll in courses that require service learning activities or less receptive to the educational benefits of service learning. Consequently, McLaughlin (2010) recommends that educators clearly convey the benefits of service learning to students at the outset of implementation. He believed that (a) it is part of educators' duties to help students learn about the outside world, ideally through community service, and (b) if not clearly conveyed, students may not fully understand the benefits, until they have actually experienced such service.

Despite the additional demands and time constraints that service learning imposes, some non-traditional commuting students appear to recognize the educational benefits of service learning. Students' perceptions may be altered by the service learning experience, as in the case of Tanya, who initially resented the service learning requirement. Tanya was "carrying 17 credits, working part time, with a family and a business of my own. I was wondering where am I going to get this time; but then once I started working, I enjoyed it" (Hughes, 2002, p. 77). Prior to participating in service learning, students may not appreciate its value. However, several studies have shown that, after participating in service learning, many students think that the experience may benefit them as future professionals, and that all students should complete a service learning experience (Barner, 2000). Other studies indicate that the more time students spent in civic engagement activities, the more they appreciated the experiences, as being substantive and worthwhile to both the community and themselves (Duckenfield & Swick, 2002).

A recent study of undergraduates at a Hispanic-serving university may offer indications of the components that may be instrumental in fostering students' recognition of the educational value of a service learning experience. Fedynich, Doan-Crider, and Fedynich (2012) applied Kolb's experiential learning model to the design of service learning, hoping that the model may facilitate: (a) concrete learning experience, (b) reflection on the experience, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) application of the experience and insights gained by a new experience. The researchers postulated that, by using this model of processing, the experience would enhance students' appreciation of the learning and benefits gained from the service learning activities. They reported that higher than 90 percent of the participants believed that the service learning project was positively correlated between high academic achievement and meeting career goals. Thus, their findings support research documenting the positive impact of service learning inside and outside the classroom.

Overall, research findings indicate that students' perceptions of factors of time, work, family responsibility, and other personal obligations may hinder their willingness to participate in civic engagement activities such as service learning. Hence, the investigators in this study were interested in comparing responses among students who work full-time, part-time, and not at all, in order to determine students' attitudes and to measure differences in the perceived value of service learning. Although previous research studies have investigated the impact of students' work status on attitudes toward service learning, there is no substantive research on the impact of the number of hours worked by students each week. This study addresses this gap (Sather & Reed-Bouley, 2007). Two main research hypotheses are the following:

H1: Working students feel that service learning activities are more difficult to complete than non-working students.

H2: Working students do not perceive the high value of service learning.

Methods

This study was conducted at a public, Master's degree-granting urban institution of higher education in Northwest Indiana. The institution's enrollment was about 5,500 students, predominantly undergraduates. There were no residential facilities at this institution. The university draws its students from widely divergent local communities, and has been ranked by US News and World Report as the sixth most economically diverse among all regional universities in the Midwest (Best Colleges, 2010).

To initiate the research, the campus coordinator of service learning sent an email to faculty members who had integrated service learning into their coursework in the past, asking them to have their students participate in a survey examining their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of service learning. Seven faculty members who were integrating service learning components in current courses agreed to administer the survey. Five faculty members who were not integrating service learning into current courses agreed to administer the survey to their students as a control group. Several classes were offered onsite during the day, afternoon and evening; several were online classes. The onsite classes completed a paper survey; the online classes completed the survey electronically, through SurveyMonkey. The subject areas of the classes were Business, Communication, Computer Information Systems, Education, English, and Psychology. Service learning assignments included the following: working with teachers and students in local schools; conducting activities with children at a nearby Boys and Girls Club; advising community members on tax forms; and producing radio public service announcements.

The survey was based on an instrument developed and piloted by Paul Strather, Director of the Service Learning Academy at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. The survey examined student attitudes in several areas of service learning. All students received the survey the last week of the semester, after all service learning activities had been completed. In terms of data collection and analysis, the survey management tool, SurveyMonkey, and the software program, SPSS, were utilized for data input, response display, data filtering, and data frequency. The overall return rate of the survey was 94.6 percent for the control group (N=71 responded) and 76 percent for the service learning group (N=151 responded).

The control group proved similar to the service learning group in all characteristics, including student status, class level, and gender. Almost three quarters of the respondents were female (73 percent) and full time students made up 81 percent of respondents. Over 90 percent of respondents were undergraduate students. All but two students were native English speakers. Some of the students (24 percent) were parents; however, most (65 percent) lived with their parents. The race and ethnicity of survey participants were as follows: White (76 percent), African American (13 percent), Hispanic (10 percent), Asian (3 percent), and other (2 percent).

Results

The first data table illustrates the number of hours students worked per week, comparing the service learning group to the control group. Overall, half of the students in both groups worked more than 20 hours per week, and about a quarter of the students did not work or worked less than 10 hours per week (see Table 1).

Table 1. Student Work Hours

	Number of Students	Number of Hours Worked per Week					
		None	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	40+
Service learning Group	151	26	11	30	44	20	20
Control Group	71	4	15	15	17	12	8

Student status (full or part time) was compared to work hours. Investigators discovered that over 85 percent of the part time students worked more than 21 hours per week. Analysis showed that over 20 percent of full time students worked more than 31 hours per week.

Results of the survey were analyzed to determine the extent to which working students felt that service learning was more difficult to fit into their schedules than students who worked fewer hours or not at all. Table 2 shows the responses of the 151 students who participated in service learning during the current semester and of the 71 students in the control group. The item was chosen to measure the perceptions of students as to the difficulty of fitting service learning activities into the time constraints of their daily lives (see Table 2).

Table 2. Student Response: Agreement with the Statement, “The Service learning work was (or would be) difficult to accommodate in my schedule”

	Overall	Number of Hours Worked per Week					
		None	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	40+
Service learning Group	66	8	2	15	17	12	12
Control Group	49	2	12	9	8	12	6

A majority of both the service learning group and the control group working over 30 hours per week reported that service learning activities were hard or would be hard to fit into their schedule. A

majority of the control group, regardless of work hours, consistently believed service learning hours would be hard to accommodate. In general, the more hours worked by students, the more concern they expressed about accommodating service learning into their schedules.

Students who were enrolled currently in a course that integrated service learning were asked to rate the course's difficulty on a scale (0-9). This item was included to determine the extent to which students who worked more hours perceived the service learning course as more difficult than students who worked fewer hours (see Table 3). The average rating for the service learning course difficulty was 6.89 out of 9. Students who did not work gave the service learning course the highest difficulty rating (7.45), followed by students who worked 31-40 hours per week (7.29); the lowest difficulty rating was given by students who worked 1-10 hours per week. Students who worked 21 hours or more per week gave the service learning course higher difficulty ratings than the average (6.94). The absence of a clear pattern in students' perceptions of the service learning course's difficulty suggests that factors other than the number of hours worked per week affect students' experiences with service learning.

Table 3. Student Report of Service learning Course Difficulty (scale: 1-9)

Work Hours per Week	None	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	40+	Average
Service learning Group	7.45	5.8	6.69	7.17	7.29	6.94	6.89

The investigators also examined the extent to which students' perceptions of the value of the service learning experience differed, based on the numbers of hours worked per week (see Table 4). Data illustrate responses to a survey question asking whether or not respondents agreed that all students should have a course with a service learning component. The results showed that a majority (86 percent) of students in both groups agreed that all students should have at least one service learning experience. Interestingly, the responses suggest that students who participated in service learning and who worked part time, between 11 and 31 hours per week, may be the most supportive of integrating service learning experiences into university-level courses. Additional confirmation of working students' support for service is furnished by responses to a different survey item. Students who worked more than 31 hours per week overwhelmingly (96 percent) agreed with the statement, "The Service learning work was an important opportunity to expand my professional skills."

Table 4. Student Response: Agreement with the Statement, "All students should take at least one course with Service learning activities"

Overall	Number of Hours Worked per Week
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		None	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	40+
Service learning Group	127	25	7	28	36	11	20
Control Group	61	4	12	15	14	10	6

Students were asked for their reflections about community, since research links service learning to increased interest in the community. The service learning group agreed with the statement, “I learn enough about the community through my own activities” approximately to the same degree as the control group (58 percent service learning; 65 percent control). In addition, based on students’ gender factor, female students were less likely to find service learning difficult to accommodate than males. In both the control group and the service learning group, the male students were far more concerned about accommodating service learning into their schedule (60 percent male; 46 percent female).

Discussion

The results of the service learning survey were analyzed to answer the research questions examining college students’ attitudes toward service learning experiences in Northwest Indiana. Students who work 31 or more hours a week believe that service learning is more difficult to accommodate in their schedule than students who work fewer hours or not at all. Sixty percent of these respondents felt this way, and these results were found for students who recently completed service learning assignments. Previous research indicates that students have concerns with accommodation issues for service learning (Conner, 2004; Weglarz & Seybert, 2004). The students who participated in this study also seemed to be concerned about finding time to meet the requirements.

The 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement looked at the number of hours students work and found that more than half of all part-time students (51 percent first-year students, 61 percent seniors) work off-campus for more than 20 hours per week (NSSE, 2005). The same report also states that students at urban universities tend to work more hours than students at non-urban institutions. Twenty-five percent of first-year students at urban universities work off-campus for more than 10 hours per week, compared to 17 percent at non-urban colleges and universities. King’s 2006 report indicated 77 percent of undergraduate students work; of this percentage, 26 percent work for 1-20 hours per week, 17.5 percent work 21-34 hours, and 34.2 percent work 35 or more hours (King, 2006). At the campus where this research took place, the number of hours worked per week by students on a part time basis is well above these national norms: 33 percent of students work 1-20 hours per week and 42 percent of students work 21-40 hours per week.

In spite of barriers such as working, the survey of university-level students in Northwest Indiana indicates that completing service learning activities enabled them to perceive it as a beneficial academic experience. Those students who worked 11-31 hours per week, in particular, expressed

favorably the value of service learning experience, in conjunction with the statement, “All students should take at least one course with service learning activities.” Such a positive perception of service learning by working students is also found in a similar study at the University of Nebraska-Omaha and the College of St. Mary in Omaha (Sather & Bouley, 2007). Taken together, these studies indicate that working students perceive the value of the real world connection offered by community engagement activities, even though they often encounter scheduling conflicts and difficulties managing their time.

The results of this study also indicate that working students perceive a clear potential benefit of service learning for their current or future careers. Almost all students (96 percent) who worked 31 or more hours per week agreed that service learning gave them an opportunity to expand their professional skills. However, Butin’s (2006) caution about appropriately balancing opportunities for civic engagement in light of competing demands on students’ time may be well-placed. Initial resistance to service learning from working students is likely to be expected, especially when activities are required to be performed during weekdays. Hughes’ study (2002) states that working students have shown high levels of concern about their ability to find the time for service learning, even showing a tendency to drop classes that require service learning during weekdays. As similarly suggested by this study, it is recommended to help working students understand the expectations and benefits of service learning prior to its implementation, with the recognition that such students will be initially worried about managing their time and schedules. This study confirms earlier research that suggests that when planning service learning assignments for university-level courses, faculty need to pay attention to the overall time requirements imposed on students, as well as the need for flexibility in scheduling service learning activities with partnering agencies and institutions of the surrounding community.

Furthermore, flexibility is needed to effectively accommodate students’ daily schedule. In a recent study (Donovan, 2008), for example, graduate students who were in-service teachers were required to complete service learning activities in an educational setting that was different from the one in which they worked. Students were concerned about how they could spend time at other schools, while working full time during school hours. Flexible coordination and varied service learning placements made it possible for these students to meet their service learning requirements, for example, by visiting early childhood centers before work, by participating in extra-curricular activities after work, and by tutoring on the weekends at non-profit organizations. This experience confirms the experiences of others that even students who are employed full time are able to successfully complete service learning with effective preparation and flexibility (Swick & Rowls, 2002).

This study indicated that most of the students who participated in service learning found educational value in the experience and were able to find the time needed to perform the activities. Other research suggests that faculty members need to link students’ needs to the local community’s needs to make the service learning activities more meaningful (Caney, 2004). This is of particular concern for universities with substantial commuter-student populations, as students who live outside the local

community of the university may need additional support to perceive the service learning experience as meaningful and engaging. A recent report on students' attitudes toward community engagement, conducted by Indiana Campus Compact (2007), called upon institutions of higher education to do more to make students knowledgeable of the needs of local communities. Students' awareness of the benefits of service learning, as shown in this study, suggests that university-level students—even those who work 20-40 hours per week—may be more willing to participate in community engagement than university faculty suppose.

In summary, in order to increase students' participation in service learning or other types of community engagement in Northwest Indiana, university faculty may need to find more flexible ways of implementing activities that link academic learning to community engagement (Cone, 2003; Dardig, 2004). When provided with community engagement activities, students are more likely (a) to experience educational benefits, such as professional and interpersonal skill development, (b) to contribute to the local communities of Northwest Indiana, and (c) to become supportive of community engagement, despite their initial perceptions of the scheduling barrier by full and part-time employment.

Limitations

This study was based on students' responses to a survey that was implemented at an institution of higher education in Northwest Indiana. Located in an urban setting, the university has a population in which the overwhelming majority (87 percent) of students works, at least on a part time basis. Results may be different in other settings with different student populations. At the time of this survey, service learning was relatively new to this institution; support for service learning among faculty and students may be different from that displayed at other institutions. In particular, institutions with a longer and stronger tradition of service learning or experiential learning may be better able to address student concerns, and there may be more resources available to help working students succeed at community engagement activities.

Conclusion

At the time of this survey, service learning was in its infancy at this university. Only a few faculty members had included service learning components in their courses. Faculty voiced concerns about imposing service learning requirements on a commuter-student population.

It seems to be a logical presumption that a high percentage of students who work full or part time jobs while enrolled in university courses might pose a considerable barrier to implementing service learning successfully. However, most of the students in this study who participated in service learning thought favorably of it. Moreover, these same participants thought that all students should participate in some form of service learning activities in connection with their university-level courses. As might be expected, students who worked more hours per week reported some difficulty in completing service

learning activities. However, these same students looked favorably upon their service learning experiences and found educational value in them, particularly in the area of developing professional skills. Interestingly, and contrary to the initial apprehensions of the faculty, students who worked more hours per week expressed greater support for service learning. Why, exactly, working students were supportive of service learning is not clear. However, the somewhat counterintuitive findings of this survey may help to overcome barriers to service learning that arise from misconceptions about students' attitudes toward it. As a contribution to the scholarly research on community engagement, this study may help university-level students, particularly those who live in Northwest Indiana, gain access to service learning opportunities that enhance their educational and professional careers while benefiting the communities of their region.

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