Chapter 8

Perceptions of Service-Learning in the Sunshine State

Jarrad D. Plante
University of Central Florida, USA

Lauren I. Murray
University of Central Florida, USA

Melody A. Bowdon
University of Central Florida, USA

Amanda M. Wolcott
University of Central Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

College students enroll in service-learning coursework for many reasons. For some, the opportunity to enhance classroom-based learning by engaging in hands-on activities benefiting the community serve as an important motivator. As the nation’s only campus-based civic engagement association, Campus Compact promotes community and public service that forges partnerships, provides training and resources for faculty seeking community-based learning (service-learning) into their curriculum while developing students’ citizenship skills. Florida Campus Compact is comprised of over 50 college and university presidents committed to engaging students in active citizenship via participation in public and community service. In this chapter, researchers surveyed 437 students enrolled in service-learning courses from nine (9) participating Florida Campus Compact institutions. The purpose of the project was to examine how service-learning and student volunteer opportunities are shaping educational experiences from transdisciplinary backgrounds for students and impacting the communities around them. Participation in the project provided a complete assessment of students’ connections to their communities, political activism, and career employability. The results will shape service-learning practices at those participating campuses across the state of Florida.

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INTRODUCTION

College students enroll in service-learning coursework for a variety of reasons. For some, the opportunity to enhance classroom-based learning by engaging in hands-on activities benefiting the community serve as an important motivator. Kronick (2007) considers these opportunities to be academic service-learning, something he defines as “the process of integrating active assistance in the community into the learning that is occurring in the classroom” (p.300). Research indicates that academic service learning enables students to apply theory to practice, understand issues facing the community, and enhance personal development (Darby, Longmire-Avital, Chenault, & Haglund, 2013; Eyler & Giles, 1999). It has also been shown to enhance academic performance, leadership development, and self-efficacy (Astin & Sax, 1999).

Several distinct differences between traditional classroom instruction and service-learning courses have been identified. First, students enrolled in service-learning courses devoted more time to those courses than other traditionally taught courses though they often report difficulty managing their time (Rosing, Reed, Ferrari, & Bothne, 2010). Second, more women than men choose to enroll in service-learning coursework; female students tend to have significantly higher levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation than males for college and specifically service-learning courses (Brouse, Basch, LeBlanc, McKnight, & Lei, 2010). Third, service-learning courses placed greater emphasis on writing than other courses. However, students’ writing abilities improve as a result of their service-learning coursework (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). Students reported increasingly higher satisfaction and motivations for learning in service-learning based coursework as the semester over the semester (Furco, 2003; Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre, 2002).

Participation in service-learning has been linked to academic engagement in numerous studies. Examples of this engagement include increased social integration and feelings of belonging on campus and increased satisfaction with their collegiate experience and class attendance and improved academic performance (GPA and writing). Students also demonstrate gains in academic self-efficacy, confidence interacting with faculty members outside of the classroom, and willingness to seek help from campus administrators (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Astin & Sax, 1998; Kuh, 2008; Yeh, 2010). Engagement in academic service-learning has also been linked to increases in student participants’ critical thinking abilities and greater complexities of understanding than their peers (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Finally, students who engaged in reflection activities tied to their service-learning activities demonstrated statistically significant increases in their ability to analyze increasing complex problems than their peers (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

These benefits have been identified in many unique student populations, including honors students (Stewart, 2008), low-income and first-generation students (McKay & Estrella 2008; Yeh, 2010), and first-year students (Stavrianopoulos, 2008).

Institutions providing service-learning opportunities to their students have benefited from increased student retention and persistence and graduation rates. Researchers hypothesize that this is because service-learning increases students’ feelings of fit and commitment to the campus, and also cite stronger relationships with faculty and peer groups as motivators for continued enrollment (Bringle, Hatcher, & Muthiah, 2010; Kuh 2008). Bringle and colleagues (2010) determined that students who participate in service-learning coursework in their first year are more likely to be retained into their second year and ultimately graduate from their institution. First-generation and low-income students also report greater institutional commitment and motivation to graduate after participating in service-learning coursework (McKay & Estrella, 2008; Yeh, 2010).