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# Making a Difference: Does Service-Learning Promote Civic Engagement in MPA Students?

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## ABSTRACT

This project was designed to explore whether service-learning promotes civic engagement for public administration graduate students. Although service-learning has been extensively studied in the undergraduate setting, no studies of it could be found in the graduate school setting. Moreover, no studies addressed whether service-learning actually promotes civic engagement in situations in which the field of study is inherently oriented toward civic engagement. It is possible that students in such fields may believe that their professional work is their civic engagement. Consequently, this study represents a first step in evaluating the connection between service-learning and civic engagement in graduate students. Three graduate courses in the Master of Public Administration program, Program Evaluation (Fall 2001), Research Methods (Fall 2001), and Quantitative Methods (Spring 2002), were involved. A survey instrument was used to assess levels of civic engagement along with qualitative assessments of students' reflections on their projects. The research demonstrated that service learning did not positively impact levels of civic engagement for these students and provided additional support for the literature on public service motivation.

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All of us who teach public administration take it for granted that participation is essential for democracy to survive and thrive. Democracy requires a culture that fosters strong convictions and a readiness to compromise along with a strong sense of civic responsibility (Elhstain, 1977; Boyte and Farr, 1997; Mendel-Reyes, 1998; Barber and Battistoni, 1993; Battistoni, 1997). Such a culture promotes civic engagement. Civic engagement may be defined as participation in voluntary associations and the political process (Kenworthy, 1997).

Unfortunately, cynicism about politics and interest group identification have combined to make significant inroads into the strength of democratic culture (Elhstain, 1977). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, government bashing became the basis for many political campaigns and a strong preference for private solutions to public problems emerged (Barber and Battistoni, 1993). At the same time, the public grew increasingly weary of poor government performance. The scandals of the Clinton era, culminating in a disputed presidential election, added fuel to the fire of public distrust and discontent.

Among college students, levels of disengagement have steadily increased since the 1970s. The percentage of 18- to 29-year-olds who voted in presidential elections dropped from about half in the early 1970s to less than one-third in the 2000 election. In 2000, only 28 percent of college freshmen indicated that they frequently discussed politics, down from more than 60 percent in 1966 (Galston, 2001). Left unchecked, the politics of resentment and disengagement threatens to destroy the cultural norms of engagement and compromise that sustain our democracy (Elhstain, 1997).

Service-learning, a form of experiential learning that combines classroom study with community service (Hunter and Brisbin, 2000), is often proposed as one way to rebuild that sense of civic engagement. Service-learning promises to improve critical thinking skills, the integration of theory with practice, general work-life skills such as communication, and civic engagement (Gray et al., 2000; Hunter and Brisbin, 2000; Shumer and Hengel, 1998; Battistoni, 1997; Jacoby, 1996). Battistoni (1997) suggests that service-learning is most effective when students work as a team—when collaborative learning techniques are incorporated into service-learning projects.

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## *Making a Difference: Does Service-Learning Promote Civic Engagement in MPA Students?*

By bringing students out of the classroom and into the community to address real problems, service-learning allows students to learn about the gravity of community problems and to take action to address those problems (Boyte and Farr, 1997; Mendel-Reyes, 1998). Many studies have claimed to demonstrate a connection between service-learning and civic engagement in the undergraduate setting; however, many questions remain. This research sought answers to three questions:

- Does service-learning promote civic engagement among graduate students?
- Will service-learning promote civic engagement in students who are studying disciplines and professions like political science and public administration, which are inherently civically engaged?
- Can service-learning change civic engagement behaviors as opposed to attitudes about civic engagement? In other words, will service-learning encourage students to practice what they preach about civic engagement?

### DISCUSSION

Although many definitions of service-learning have been proposed, Barbara Jacoby offers the most widely accepted:

Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning (Jacoby, 1996, 5).

Service-learning participants deliver service to their community and, at the same time, learning takes place (Shumer and Hengel, 1998).

Weigart (1998) suggests there are six elements that distinguish service-learning from other forms of voluntarism or community service. From the standpoint of the community, the students provide a service that meets a need or goal defined by the community. This emphasis on the community's role in

defining the purpose of the project echoes Jacoby's (1996) call for reciprocity. The community's involvement not only increases the probability that the community will accept the results of the project; it can empower the community to take on additional projects (Mendel-Reyes, 1998; Kahne and Westheimer, 1999).

From the standpoint of faculty, service-learning is a pedagogy grounded in experience. The student's service flows naturally and logically from course objectives, it is integrated into the course through assignments, and those assignments are evaluated (Weigart, 1998). The assignments should include some element of reflection that enables the student to think critically about the community problem they are working to address (Jacoby, 1996).

Proponents claim that service-learning improves critical thinking skills, the integration of theory with practice, and general work-life skills such as communication, and that it promotes civic engagement. Evidence of these benefits, however, is limited and mixed. For example, a large body of case studies attests to the benefits of service-learning (Markus, Howard, and King, 1993). These case studies have documented service-learning's benefits in increasing students' understanding and mastery of research methods (Palozzolo, 1997; Reardon, 1998), civic engagement (Driscoll, et al., 1996; Battistoni, 1997; Eyer, 2000), communication skills (Battistoni, 1997), sensitivity to diversity and self-awareness (Driscoll, et al., 1996), and interpersonal skills (Eyer, 2000).

Only a few studies have undertaken a quantitative assessment of service-learning's proposed benefits. In an experimental study, Markus, Howard, and King (1993) used a pre-and post-test design to compare the performance and attitudes of students involved in a service-learning component with students in the same courses, with the same professors, who did no service-learning. Students in the treatment group showed significant increases in several measures of civic engagement, including their willingness to volunteer their time to helping others, working toward equal opportunity for all Americans, and finding a career that helps others. Moreover, students in the treatment group had higher attendance rates (75

percent for the control group; 85 percent for the service-learning group) and averaged a half-grade higher in the course.

The Institute for Research on Higher Education released the results of a nationwide survey of the effectiveness of service-learning. The survey, which was administered to more than 33,000 graduates of the Class of 1992-93 from eighty four-year colleges and universities, produced sobering results. Although many of the respondents believed strongly in the importance of civic engagement, few of them actually did anything about their beliefs. For example, 65 percent of respondents indicated that it was important to very important to participate in volunteer work, but only 15 percent regularly volunteered. The questionnaire also attempted to evaluate the impact of curriculum on civic engagement. The results indicated that the curriculum had no effect on the likelihood of a graduate being civically engaged.

The most comprehensive study was undertaken by the Rand Corporation (Gray, et al., 2000), under contract with the Corporation for National Service. Rand's study was a three-year evaluation of Learn and Serve America, Higher Education (LSAHE). In the process, more than 1,300 students from 28 institutes with grants from LSAHE and more than 400 organizations that hosted students doing community service were surveyed. This study yielded mixed results. Students participating in service-learning reported that such courses took more time and that such courses required more writing than comparable courses that did not involve service-learning. Moreover, students in service-learning courses were more likely to be satisfied than respondents in non-service courses. Satisfaction, however, was not a result of whether or not the course was easy. There were no significant differences in expected or received grades between students in service-learning courses and the comparison group. Students involved in service-learning were more likely to believe that their service had increased their levels of civic engagement and life skills than students in the comparison group; however, this difference accounted for no more than 7 percent of the variance. No differences were found for academic skills.

The mixed results of the research into service-learning suggest that Giles and Eyer (1998) are correct in claiming that there is still much to be learned about the effects of this pedagogy on students' learning and levels of civic engagement. For example, we do not know how or whether service-learning affects graduate students; nor do we know whether there are discipline-based differences in how students respond to service-learning programs. To probe for answers to these questions, this exploratory study will focus on the effects of service-learning on the civic engagement levels of graduate students in a Master of Public Administration program. Public administration is a discipline that is all about civic engagement. Indeed, a body of literature has emerged suggesting that public administrators are predisposed to being motivated by an ethic of service to the public (Perry, 2000; Crewson, 1997; Brewer, et al., 2000). Hence, there is a legitimate question about the utility of this pedagogical approach in this discipline, particularly in programs focused on educating in-service students.

#### COURSE DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To study this issue, three graduate courses in the Master of Public Administration program, Program Evaluation (Fall 2001), Research Methodology (Fall 2001), and Quantitative Methods (Spring 2002), were selected for involvement. The majority of the students (9 of 11, or 82 percent) were in-service; that is, they were professionals working full-time in public and/or nonprofit organizations.

In the Program Evaluation course, students worked in small teams of two or three members to conduct an actual program evaluation of a nonprofit or public organization. In the Research Methods and Quantitative Methods courses, a cohort of students proceeded through the two classes in sequence. Their project was to research the current state of a low-income, African-American neighborhood targeted for revitalization and to identify actions needed to create a viable community.

For all three classes, a survey instrument designed to measure student attitudes toward civic engagement, current levels of actual civic engagement activ-

ity, and whether students had chosen their present job out of public service motives was used in a pre- and post-test model; this survey is provided in the appendix to this article. The instrument was developed using Kenworthy's (1997) definition of civic engagement: participation in voluntary associations and the political process. With this in mind, questions were developed to determine students' current levels of participation in political life; religious, artistic, or cultural activities; or social causes. In addition, students were asked how important they believe civic engagement is and whether they had chosen their current profession out of a felt need to be civically engaged. Students responded on a modified Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Sub-indices were then developed for political, social, religious, and cultural/educational engagement. Questions 1, 3-7, and 15 were combined to form the political engagement sub-index. Questions 2 and 8-10 were combined to form the social engagement sub-index. Questions 11-12 formed the religious engagement sub-index, while questions 13-14 formed the cultural/educational sub-index. An overall index for civic engagement combined the questions from the sub-indices.

For the Program Evaluation course, the instrument was administered at the beginning and again at the end of the course. For the cohort group in the Research Methods and Quantitative Methods courses, the instrument was administered three times, at the beginning and again at the end of the Research Methods course and at the end of the Quantitative Methods course.

In addition to the quantitative assessment, students were asked to write reflective essays on the service-learning experience. At the end of the Research Methods and Program Evaluation courses, students were asked to address whether they believed the project had helped them master the course material and to identify the three most important things they had learned from the project. At the end of the Quantitative Methods course, students were asked to write an essay connecting their experience in the community with the theories they had read on redevelopment, urban sprawl, and

poverty. This essay allowed the instructor to evaluate whether the project helped students connect theory to practice, an important theme in public administration. These students were also asked once again to identify the three most important things they had learned from the project.

#### FINDINGS

##### *Quantitative*

The survey results clearly showed that students in this study believed that civic engagement is important. All respondents in the pre-test agreed or strongly agreed that doing work that can improve people's lives and being involved in the community and in political activity were important. In fact, 63.6 percent of the students strongly agreed that doing work that can improve others' lives was important, and 72.7 percent strongly agreed that it was important to be involved in the community. Political activity received slightly less support; only 45.5 percent of the students strongly agreed that political activity was important.

Moreover, the students also believed that being knowledgeable about politics and local issues was important. All respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it was important to keep up with political news and to be knowledgeable about local socioeconomic issues and problems. Levels of agreement were not quite as strong for these two items as for the first set. Less than half of the students (45.5 percent) strongly agreed that keeping up with political news was important, and only 18.2 percent of the students strongly agreed that being knowledgeable about local socioeconomic issues was very important.

In short, these students believed in civic engagement before they began their service-learning project. Did this belief affect their activity levels? Table 1 summarizes results from the survey on levels of activity before beginning the service-learning project; this small sample of students was very engaged in their community before beginning the project.

Table 2 compares pre-test and post-test scores. The strongly disagree/disagree and agree/strongly agree categories are collapsed to make the table easier to read. Scores changed between the pre-test and post-test for just five of the items. Students were less

**Table 1. Pre-Test Scores on Civic Engagement Inventory**

	Percentage Response			
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Keeping up with political news	0	0	54.5	45.5
Knowledgeable about socioeconomic issues/problems	0	0	81.8	18.2
Vote in elections	0	0	0	100.00
Petitioned the government	9.1	27.3	18.2	45.5
Donated to candidate	18.2	27.3	36.4	18.2
Political volunteer	9.1	18.2	36.4	36.4
Member of political group	27.3	27.3	27.3	18.2
Donated to social cause	9.1	18.2	27.3	45.5
Member of a group working to solve social problems	9.1	18.2	9.1	63.6
Volunteer for a group working to solve social problems	9.1	27.3	18.2	45.5
Volunteer for religious organization	18.2	18.2	9.1	54.5
Donated to religious organization	18.2	9.1	36.4	36.4
Volunteer for cultural, educational cause	0	9.1	63.6	27.3
Donated to cultural, educational cause	18.2	18.2	54.5	9.1
Written to editor or political leader	9.1	54.5	36.4	0
Chose current job "to make a difference"	0	33.3	33.3	33.3*
Job lets me work to improve community	0	0	33.3	66.6*
Doing work that creates change is important	0	0	36.4	63.6
It is important to be involved in the community	0	0	27.3	72.7
It is important to be politically active	0	0	54.5	45.5

n=11  
\*Two students did not work; therefore, their responses were eliminated from the data set for these two items.

likely in the post-test to be a member of a political group, a group working to solve social problems, or a volunteer for a cultural or educational cause, and they were less likely to donate to a religious group. Scores increased for only one item: students were more likely to donate to a social cause at the conclusion of the project than at the beginning. One subtle shift in emphasis that does not show on this chart is worth noting. At the beginning of the project, 81.8

percent of students agreed that it was important to be knowledgeable about local socioeconomic issues and problems. At the conclusion of the project, 90.9 percent of the students strongly agreed with that statement.

A comparison of the index scores shows small declines in all four sub-indices and the overall index, as shown in Table 3. None of the differences was statistically significant.

**Table 2. Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores**

	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	SD/D	A/SA	DS/D	A/SA
Keeping up with political news	0	100	0	100
Knowledgeable about socioeconomic issues/problems	0	100	0	100
Vote in elections	0	100	0	100
Petitioned the government	36.4	63.6	36.4	63.6
Donated to candidate	45.5	54.5	45.5	54.5
Political volunteer	27.3	72.7	27.3	72.7
Member of political group	54.5	45.5	72.7	27.3
Donated to social cause	27.3	72.7	9.1	90.9
Member of a group working to solve social problems	27.3	72.7	36.4	63.6
Volunteer for a group working to solve social problems	36.4	63.6	36.4	63.6
Volunteer for religious organization	36.4	63.6	36.4	63.6
Donated to religious organization	27.3	72.7	36.4	63.6
Volunteer for cultural, educational cause	9.1	90.9	27.3	72.7
Donated to cultural, educational cause	36.4	63.6	36.4	63.6
Written to editor or political leader	63.6	36.4	63.6	36.4
Chose current job "to make a difference"	0	100	0	100*
Job lets me work to improve community	0	100	0	100*
Doing work that creates change is important	0	100	0	100
It is important to be involved in the community	0	100	0	100
It is important to be politically active	0	100	0	100

n=11  
 \*Two students did not work; therefore, their responses were eliminated from the data set for these two items.

*Qualitative*

Students were unanimous in concluding that the service-learning project enhanced their understanding and mastery of course material. Students concurred that the opportunity to apply the principles taught was extremely important to aiding their understanding of research methods and program evaluation techniques. Beyond this general agreement, there was wide variation in what students believed were the "most important things learned" in

the course. Responses ranged from "working in a team" (unanimous), to how to conduct focus groups, to more personalized, individual reflections such as understanding the effects of racism and poverty in the community.

Several comments provided in the essays were particularly poignant. One non-native student commented on the vast differences between poverty in America and her home country, Peru. Another Caucasian student admitted that he would never

**Table 3. Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores**

	<i>Pre-test Mean</i>	<i>Post-test Mean</i>
Political engagement	2.9481	2.8831
Social engagement	3.1364	3.0682
Religious engagement	2.9545	2.6364
Cultural/educational engagement	2.8636	2.5455
Overall civic engagement	3.1030	2.8545
n=11		

have visited the African-American neighborhood under study in the Research Methods course if it had not been for the project. One African-American student was amazed at the history he uncovered of that same community—at its former vitality and cultural richness. That student was confronted with poverty and was inspired to go on to doctoral study and become more actively engaged in working toward social justice. He said, “I don’t feel I exploit on a conscious or deliberate basis, but I see and recognize those that do, but I have never stepped up and challenged them.” Exposure to victims of abuse led another student to discover a research line she wants to continue to investigate the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs for perpetrators.

In the final essay for the Quantitative Methods class, students demonstrated a strong ability to connect theory to practice. In a review of community empowerment theory, one student accurately identified the chief problem with the project under study: “Telling a community what you are going to do is not a method of empowerment or a means to develop political capital.” Another linked research on gentrification to the redevelopment project, noting that gentrification was a genuine threat because of the structure and nature of the current initiative.

#### DISCUSSION

Although the qualitative results of this study are in line with previous study results, the quantitative results were clearly disappointing. The reflective

essays clearly establish the students’ perception that service-learning did aid their learning course material, helped them connect theory to the practice of public administration, and taught them other important lessons they might not have learned otherwise. Thus, this study corroborates findings from other studies on the effectiveness of service-learning in promoting academic learning and a deeper understanding of community issues and problems.

Nonetheless, the quantitative results of this small study clearly do not support the idea that service-learning promotes civic engagement in graduate students. Rather, the results suggest that students may have decreased their previous levels of engagement. This could be a consequence of small sample size, the already high levels of civic engagement in the sample studied, the project itself, and/or the phenomenon known as public service motivation.

The small sample size and short-term nature of the project make these results tentative at best. For conclusive results, a longitudinal study, with data collected from several different institutions, is essential. With this in mind, I am actively seeking colleagues to help expand this project into one that will incorporate multiple institutions and in-service and traditional graduate students and will be conducted over a longer time frame to better assess the effects of service-learning on civic engagement.

The principle project in this study may also have affected results. From a civic engagement standpoint, this project had the advantage of exposing students to the poorest neighborhood in the community and to the problem of racism. Unfortunately, the project also exposed them to some of the worst aspects of the local political process, including corruption and the exploitation of social problems by political and even religious leaders. Such exposure may galvanize students into more activism, or it may engender deeper feelings of cynicism and alienation. It is possible, then, that the nature of the project itself may



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change student attitudes in ways that are unforeseen and perhaps undesirable. This is an avenue that demands further research.

Finally, the literature on public-service motivation suggests that individuals who enter the public service are at least partially motivated to do so by an abiding concern for the public good (Perry, 2000; Crewson, 1977; Brewer et al., 2000). The results of this study lend support for this concept. All of the students in this study who were working professionals—nine of eleven—indicated that they had chosen their present position because it allowed them to make a difference in other people's lives and let them work to improve the community. In short, for these students, and perhaps for other MPA students who are in-service professionals, it may be that their work is their primary vehicle for civic engagement. If this is the case, a pedagogy such as service-learning may be valuable for many reasons but may

still make no improvements in levels of civic engagement.

Although this research is intriguing and suggestive, it is in no way conclusive. The small sample size and the large number of in-service students could have skewed the results. Consequently, as noted above, a longitudinal study, involving students from multiple institutions, is needed to investigate the impact of service-learning on graduate students. Larger sample sizes, the incorporation of more traditional graduate students, and the inclusion of students from other disciplines would permit researchers to determine more definitively the impact of service-learning. Finally, a comparative approach including undergraduate and graduate students in the same study could yield interesting findings that would help teachers make more informed choices among different pedagogical techniques.

Appendix  
Civic Engagement Inventory

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I keep up with local, state or national political news.	1	2	3	4
2. I am knowledgeable about local socioeconomic issues and problems.	1	2	3	4
3. I vote in local, state and national elections.	1	2	3	4
4. I have petitioned the government or participated in a petitioning campaign.	1	2	3	4
5. I donate money to political candidates.	1	2	3	4
6. I have volunteered time to support a political candidate.	1	2	3	4
7. I am currently a member of a group involved in politics.	1	2	3	4
8. I donate money to group(s) working to solve social problems in my community (other than a religious organization).	1	2	3	4
9. I am a member or supporter of a group(s) working to solve social problems in my community (other than a religious organization).	1	2	3	4
10. I volunteer time to group(s) working to solve social problems in my community (other than a religious organization).	1	2	3	4
11. I volunteer time to a religious organization.	1	2	3	4
12. I donate money to a religious organization.	1	2	3	4
13. I have volunteered time to support arts, cultural or educational programs in my community.	1	2	3	4
14. I donate money to support arts, cultural, or educational programs in my community.	1	2	3	4
15. I have written to a political figure or to the editor of the local paper on a political or social issue.	1	2	3	4
16. I chose the job I have because I wanted to "make a difference" in my community.	1	2	3	4
17. My job allows me to work to improve my community.	1	2	3	4
18. Doing work that can change people's lives for the better is very important to me.	1	2	3	4
19. I believe it is important to be involved in my community.	1	2	3	4
20. I believe it is important to be involved in political activity.	1	2	3	4

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