Community Service Engagement: How our students benefit from this service and how to encourage them to pursue community service

Maya M. Khanna

Creighton University

There are many ways that educators can encourage students to engage in community service. I will discuss several ways in this chapter. However, the first question to address is, "Why should we encourage students to engage in community service?" There are several reasons for this. First, and most important, the act of helping others should be valued and promoted. Thus, we should want our students to help their communities and those that are less fortunate than they. Second, many disciplines in the social sciences (e.g., psychology) are centered on service. Furthermore, many of our students will be working in service-oriented positions as counselors, social workers, school psychologists, health professionals, etc. Many of these positions will require our current students to interact with diverse populations of clients and/or patients in their future. Participating in community service during their undergraduate years is a clear way to help our students see the vital role that service plays in our discipline and to allow them to interact with a wide array of individuals from our communities.

There are additional reasons that we should encourage our students to pursue community service. For example, an increasing number of colleges and universities are making community service a key aspect of their general liberal arts curriculum. Furthermore, many of our colleges and universities are religiously affiliated and have the dedication to the service of others as one of their core missions. For example, at Creighton University, a Jesuit Catholic University, our primary core value is service to others, and to shape our students into women and men for and with others. Thus, as educators in these institutions, we are compelled to serve others and to create this environment of service among our students.

A final reason that we should encourage our students to participate in community service is that several recent studies have indicated that students, from any age range, involved in service, are more likely to be successful than are students not engaged in community service (Ting, 2000; Ting & Robinson, 1998; also see Furco & Root, 2010 for a recent review). This success takes many forms ranging from higher grade point averages, to higher graduation rates, to better emotional health. In fact, Kahne and Sporte (2008) even found that students involved in community service were more likely to develop a commitment to civic engagement than were students not participating in community service. Furthermore, Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, and Snyder (1998) found that adolescents who engage in community service activities not only enjoyed higher grade point averages and higher educational aspirations, but also had higher self-esteem as compared to those adolescents that did not participate in community service. Johnson and colleagues also argue that this involvement in community service enhances the college experience. That is, Johnson et al. (1998) found a relationship between students' level of engagement in community service and their self-reported feelings of academic motivation. Johnson and colleagues argue that these community activities may help these students see themselves as having greater professional and academic potential than they saw in themselves before participating in community service.

Based on Johnson and colleagues (1998), it seems clear that student volunteers may benefit from community service. I would argue that as long as everyone is whole-heartedly engaged in the community service, all parties involved enjoy its benefits. That is, as long as the community program welcomes the service, the service program is designed to serve the needs of the community, and the volunteers are adequately trained and engaged in the service, the community and students will benefit as will the educational institution supporting the service. Thus, the next question is, "As an educator, how can I encourage my students to engage in community service?" There are several ways that this

can be achieved. I will discuss five such routes. One route is by integrating a service-learning component into relevant courses in which the particular focus of service overlaps with course content. Another way to encourage community service is by including a general community service requirement of students for general courses. Third, we also can encourage service by collaborating with students on research with indirect community service consequences. Fourth, we can design curricula to include capstone courses or senior projects in which students must use their newly formed skills to benefit the community. Finally, we can encourage students to engage in community service by serving as models and engaging in community service ourselves.

Service-Learning

Designing courses with a service-learning component integrated within them is a common way in which educators can encourage students to become involved in community service. In fact, Cathey and Ross (this volume) are dedicating an entire chapter to the topic of service-learning courses. Thus, I will not focus on this method of encouraging community service except to describe it briefly. Most courses with a service-learning component require students to engage in typical class activities such as attending lectures, taking exams, writing papers, etc., but they also include a component in which students work with members of a community. The community with whom the students work is related to the course material in some way. For example, Whitbourne, Collins, and Skultety (2001) conducted a course on the psychology of aging and asked students to volunteer in local retirement communities, nursing homes, and community centers. The students were involved in a wide range of activities that involved extended interaction with older adults. This type of service-learning component can be beneficial for all parties involved. The older adults receive the benefit of interacting with caring younger adults, while the students benefit from connecting material covered in their classes to real-life interactions with older adults. One aspect of service-learning activities to keep in mind is that they can require a substantial investment in time and training for the students. For example, students interacting with older adults within nursing homes will need to go through the volunteer training program at each care center in which they work. In addition, the course instructor likely will have to make arrangements with someone at the service site to perform evaluations of the students assigned to the site. Although evaluating the students is a necessary component to an effective service-learning experience, it does place a burden on site supervisors.

Community Service Requirement

Another common way to encourage students to engage in community service is through an overall course or institution requirement for students to conduct community service in order to graduate. This method is particularly common in high schools in which students are required to complete a set number of hours of community service in order to graduate (Metz & Youniss, 2005). Typically, these community service hours can be completed at a range of different community sites and the service activities do not necessarily coincide with course material. Recent studies have indicated clear benefits for this type of mandatory service. For example, Metz and Youniss (2005) found that students who volunteered became more civically engaged through their volunteer efforts. Furthermore, Metz and Youniss (2005) found that even those students who initially indicated little interest in volunteering became very civic-minded and interested in having sustained involvement within their communities by the time they had completed their community service hours. For example, these initially less-interested students reported significant increases in their commitment levels for future voting, greater understanding of the political system, and dedication to civic involvement after completing their compulsory community service hours. Based on these findings, one could argue that the completion of community service, even compulsory community service, changes students' attitudes about their community and the degree to which they want to be involved in their communities.

Another interesting effect of requiring community service of students, either as a course requirement or graduation requirement, is that many students continue their engagement with community service organizations beyond their course and/or school requirements. It is very common for students to become emotionally connected to the communities that they serve while performing required service and for the students to want to maintain their connection with those communities. In fact, Metz and Youniss (2003) gauged students' attitudes about and intentions to continue community service before and after the completion of 40 hours of school-required community service. They found that student intentions to engage in community service greatly increased after completing the school-required community service hours. In fact, many of the students with whom Metz and Youniss worked continued their community service for many hours beyond their school's requirement. Henderson, Brown, Pancer, and Ellis-Hale (2007) came to a similar conclusion when they compared a cohort of first-year college students who were required to

complete community service while in high school to a cohort of students who were not required to engage in community service. Those who had completed mandatory community service in high school still reported more positive attitudes about community service and a continued intention to participate in community service into the future more than did those students who had not been required to complete community service in high school. These positive feelings toward community service simply may be due to the tendency for people to value the behaviors they have displayed previously more so than other behaviors (Albarracin & Wyer, 2000). Nevertheless, it is encouraging that Henderson et al. (2007) found their participants reporting these positive attitudes toward future community service activities.

Of course, we must be careful when applying the findings of Metz and Youniss (2003) and Henderson et al. (2007) to our university students. These previous studies were conducted with high school students; we can only speculate that undergraduates required to complete community service would enjoy similar benefits. Further, I must acknowledge that it would be easier to implement a community service requirement within a high school than within an undergraduate institution, due to typical differences in the number of students within a high school and a university, and to differences in where students may complete their service (e.g., within the university's community or within the students' hometown communities).

Although I have not conducted a formal investigation of this, I have found that mandatory service evolves into voluntary service among many of my students. In our course on Infant and Child Development, we require our students to work with infants, toddlers, and/or children within the Omaha community at designated field placement sites for at least 16 hours during the semester. These field placements take many forms such as being a teacher's aide in the on-campus child development center or at local Montessori preschools, or serving as a tutor in a local Camp Fire USA chapter. In most of our field placement sites, our students are treated in a very similar manner as are other volunteers. Nearly all of our students complete their field placement hours and a majority of students continue to volunteer at their field placement sites beyond the 16 required hours. In fact, many students continue to volunteer at these field placement sites, especially at the Camp Fire USA sites, for the rest of their college careers. Furthermore, when reviewing the narrative evaluations for this course more than half of the students report that the field placement experience was their favorite part of the course. Thus, requiring students to complete community service seems to be beneficial and enjoyable to many students. For many students it leaves them feeling encouraged to continue on with community service well after their required hours are completed.

Research with Indirect Community Services Consequences

A third way that faculty members can encourage student involvement in community service is by collaborating with students on research projects that take place within our communities. Surprisingly, it can be easy to design research projects that are not only of scientific interest to the researcher(s), but are also embedded within our communities. As an example of this, my students and I have completed several projects in conjunction with educators within our communities. Several times we have implemented projects examining the relative benefits of different types of reading instruction strategies. In these projects, my student collaborators and I interact with the child participants in much the same way as we would if we were tutoring the children on reading techniques. Although the aim of these projects is for my student collaborators and I to collect data that will have implications for theoretical models of reading behavior, the student participants do receive some indirect benefits. For example, the young participants have experienced increases in their pronunciation skills and in their vocabularies (e.g., Khanna, Cortese, & Birchwood, 2010). Moreover, the young participants often have enjoyed interacting with my student collaborators well after the end of the research project. That is, several of my undergraduate student collaborators have continued working with the elementary students by shifting their work from the research project to tutoring the same and additional students via after-school tutoring programs run by the schools, or outside programs such as Camp Fire USA. Again, there appears to be a natural inclination for our students to engage in community service; they just need the encouragement and opportunity to do so.

Community–Based Research Capstone

A fourth way that we can encourage students to engage in community service is by designing capstone courses or senior projects that include a community-based learning component. As an example of this, professors at Sterling College in Kansas have asked their students, as part of their capstone requirement, to utilize some of the skills acquired in their psychology courses to conduct community-based learning projects (Froese, Vogts-

Scribner, Ealey, & Fairchild, 2003). Specifically, students have worked in conjunction with local schools and non-profit organizations on the design and implementation of survey studies. These studies were designed in order to address questions of interest to the non-profit groups. The students provided their experience in research methods and data analyses to help the organizations transform their questions about their programs into actionable questions for which survey studies could be conducted. For example, in one project, a school district wanted to know why local voters had opposed a bond proposal that would have benefitted the school district. The student researchers worked with administrators of the school district to develop a survey instrument that would gauge voters' concerns. The students helped to select the appropriate sample, carry out data collection and analyses, and design a report for the school district to communicate their findings. Clearly, the non-profit organizations within their community benefitted from the research services provided by these students. In addition, and most importantly, the students were able to use the skills acquired via their coursework to help their community. In fact, Froese and his colleagues found that their students reported that these experiences helped them learn that their psychology research skills could be used to help their community in a valuable way. What a wonderful way to encourage students to engage in community service, while also helping students realize the value of their training.

Modeling

A final way that we can encourage our students to engage in community service is by being involved in community service ourselves. We all know the influence of a model on another's behavior (e.g., Bandura, 1977). If our students see that we value community service enough to participate in it ourselves, they may decide that community service is an endeavor they would like to pursue as well. Most of our colleges and universities make our efforts to find community service quite easy by having countless student and/or faculty lead community service activities. For example, Creighton University sponsors an event each spring entitled Project Homeless Connect Omaha. During this event, homeless individuals and families from the Omaha area are welcomed onto campus where community volunteers have brought together dozens of community resource representatives (e.g., low-income housing representatives, local workforce development officers, legal advisors, healthcare providers, etc). These community service representatives, along with Creighton University

medical and dental students and faculty, provide services and advice to the community members who come to campus for the project. Our faculty and students are invited to volunteer at this yearly event. When faculty and staff volunteer at these events, students get the message that service to the broader community is an important value for our University community.

There are many reasons why we should encourage our students to engage in community service. As much as community service clearly benefits the community, it also benefits the individuals providing the service in the form of increasing their academic outcomes, self-esteem, and civic-mindedness. Also, we must be honest with ourselves in acknowledging that we, and our students, are very fortunate. We all have had the opportunity to obtain a higher education. This is an opportunity that is not afforded every person, not even in the United States. We have a civic and moral duty to share our educational riches with others in our community. It is a win-win for the university, its faculty, students, and our greater community. Furthermore, we can promote this engagement in community service with our students in a myriad of ways that are fully integrated with our regular teaching, research, and service activities.

References

Albarracin, D., & Wyer, R. S. (2000). The cognitive impact of past behavior: Influences on beliefs, attitudes, and future behavioral decisions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*(1), 5-22.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Froese, A. D., Vogts-Scribner, V., Ealey, S. E., & Fairchild, J. A. (2003). Service data institute: Bridging research and community service. *Teaching of Psychology, 30*, 319 – 321.

Furco, A., & Root, S. (2010). Research demonstrates the value of service learning. *Phi Delta Kappan, 91*, 16 – 20.

Henderson, A., Brown, S. D., Pancer, S. M., & Ellis-Hale, K. (2007). Mandated community service in high school and subsequent civic engagement: The case of the "double cohort" in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 36*, 849 – 860.

Johnson, M. K., Beebe, T., Mortimer, J. T., & Snyder, M. (1998). Volunteerism in adolescence: A process perspective. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 8*, 309 – 322.

Kahne, J., and Susan S. (2008) Developing citizens: The impact of civic learning opportunities on students' commitment to civic participation." *American Educational Research Journal, 45*, 738-766.

Metz, E., & Youniss, J. (2003). A demonstration that school-based required service does not deter— but heightens—volunteerism. *PS-Political Science and Politics, 36,* 281–286

Metz, E. C., & Youniss, J. (2005). Longitudinal gains in civic development through school-based required service. *Political Psychology, 26,* 413 – 437.

Ting, S. R. (2000). Predicting Asian American' academic performance in the first year of college: An approach combining SAT scores and noncognitive variables. *Journal of College Student Development, 41,* 442 – 449.

Ting, S. R. & Robinson, T. L. (1998). First-year academic success: A prediction combining cognitive and psychosocial variables for Caucasian and African American students. *Journal of College Student Development, 39,* 599 – 610.

Whitbourne, S. K., Collins, K. J., & Skultety, K. M. (2001). Formative reflections on service-learning in a course on the psychology of aging. *Educational Gerontology, 27,* 105 – 115.