

Reciprocity: A Time Commitment for Change

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The desk looms large in front of me. Armed only with a short pamphlet detailing my duties at the service learning site, I take my place behind the desk, overwhelmed by lack of instruction and concerned that I will be faced with a situation that I will not be able to handle. Clients come in, needing help that I cannot provide them, and I am constantly finding myself searching for a superior to deal with the situation. Two hours later, I am exhausted and overwhelmed, feeling like I learned more about myself than about the community I served. Unsure if I did more harm than good, I returned to my safe haven: campus.

Students all over America share a similar experience, as service learning has grown more popular on college campuses. While service learning grants a wealth of benefits to students, the work that students do in the community can cause great harm. Because one of the main pillars of service learning is reciprocity—meaning the work is intended to be mutually beneficial—these negative effects present a problem. While community organizations are being harmed, true reciprocity is impossible to attain. Thus, reciprocity is not being achieved in service learning as communities are often harmed by lack of student diligence. In order to achieve the full effects of reciprocity, students should be required to serve a minimum of ten hours in their intended organization before participating in a service learning course.

Service Learning Defined

First, I believe that it is important to define service learning. Christine M. Cress (2005), professor of educational leadership and service learning, defines the term as the engagement “in community service activities with intentional academic and learning goals and opportunities for reflection that connect to their academic disciplines.” In other words, students serve in a community in order to further their classroom learning objectives. Cress (2005) also draws a distinction between simple volunteer work and service learning, as, in service learning, students “intentionally use... intellectual capabilities and skills to address community problems.” Thus, one of the main goals of service learning is to apply one’s classroom

knowledge to improve the community they are serving in some way. This argument is the foundation for reciprocity. Students are supposed to *improve* the communities in which they serve, understanding that they will personally benefit while they aid a community organization. In fact, Jacob Bucher (2012), assistant professor of sociology at Baker University, claims that there are three main goals of service learning. The first two goals target student growth with the final goal focusing on a positive community impact that results from the students' work. Bucher (2012) further argues that the literary conversation on the two student categories has been well developed, while the community aspect of the conversation has been overlooked by scholars. It appears, however, that students are *supposed* to benefit more from service learning; after all, they pay to take the course and volunteer their time and talents to the community. Is it fair that students gain more than community organizations? Before answering that question, it would be helpful to spell out the benefits to both students and community organizations that are wrought by service learning.

Student Benefits

To begin, students, according to Cress (2005), benefit from seeing a real-world connection to their classroom studies, allowing them to put their knowledge into practice while revealing underlying communal issues that create difficulties within a community. The class structure allows students to be more actively engaged with the material, granting students more opportunity to determine educational outcomes (Cress, 2005). When students are able to be active in their learning, they are often more interested than they would be in a class that forces students to be passive information receptors (Cress, 2005). Cress (2005) also claims that service learning courses accommodate many different learning styles, which can be very beneficial to students that struggle to learn in a traditional classroom setting. Students are more likely to see how their individual life impacts the lives of others and how their lives are part of the whole, giving them a global mindset that is increasingly important in our progressively interconnected world (Cress, 2005). Cress (2005) also cites that service learning students demonstrate more ethical decision making and more advanced problem-solving skills than students who do not participate in service learning. Additionally, service learning often heightens a student's empathy for others and increases their societal awareness (Cress, 2005).

Therefore, service learning brings academic, social, and personal benefits to students.

Community Organization Benefits

Next, I will touch on the benefits that service learning brings to community organizations. According to Eugene C. Roehlkepartain (2007), a senior advisor to the president of Search Institute, service learning allows organizations to expand both their reach and their mission without facing increasing monetary costs. Additionally, organizations point out that most of the students that serve are motivated and enthusiastic, bringing life and vitality to their overworked staff members (Roehlkepartain, 2007). These students also boast specialized skills and fresh ideas that these community partners are able to utilize to further their mission (Roehlkepartain, 2007). Not only do students bring enthusiasm to the organizations, they also provide free labor on which many organizations rely heavily. In a study done by Andrea Vernon, the director of the Office of Civic Engagement at the University of Montana, and Lenoar Foster (2002), many program directors expressed their appreciation for student volunteers on the grounds that their programs would have to be greatly reduced without the presence of the college students.

While these benefits often seem very attractive to community organizations that rely on the help of volunteers, they are not inherent in service learning programs. This means that, according to Roehlkepartain (2007), there are specific elements that must be present in order to enact these benefits. Included among these is the requirement that students serve “at least twenty hours across several months (Roehlkepartain, 2007).” What happens to the organization, then, when these criteria are not met, or the student falls short?

The Question of Reciprocity

It is clear that students receive, on average, greater benefit from service learning experiences than the organizations in which they serve. Let us now return to the previous question. Is it fair that students gain more than community organizations? This question is not easy to answer, since the very structure of service learning courses is set up in a way that emphasizes the student over all else; all other benefits are just side-effects. The way Catherine Cress explains the essence of service learning is a perfect example of this dangerous mentality. She asserts that “the whole

point of service learning is for you to grow in skills and knowledge precisely because you are bringing your capabilities to real-world problems. While you do this, your community benefits as well (Cress, 2005).” Growing skills and knowledge by applying abilities to problems in the real world can rarely be seen as a negative action, but the issue I take with this stance arises from the way Cress treats the community impact. By her wording, she places the community benefits as an afterthought to the student benefits. Other scholars do the same. Just as Jacob Bucher (2012) does, Kathryn Yankura Swacha (2015), a Ph.D. candidate at Purdue University, also puts community benefits at the bottom of her list. In explaining the three main goals of service-learning, she focuses on students for the first two goals and only on the third goal does she mention benefit to the community (Swacha, 2015). However, the goal’s ambiguity as well as its placement in regard to the other two goals is troubling. Cress, Bucher, Swacha, and many other scholars in the field of service learning prioritize students over community partners, creating a hierarchy in a system already riddled with power dynamics. I am not arguing that students should not be beneficiaries of these classes. However, I am arguing that the positive impacts on community organizations should be equally important. It is evident that this is not the case in American service learning today, evidenced by the harm that is often done to community organizations based on a lack of student diligence.

The Argument for Hours

Harm is not inherent to service learning programs, yet its presence is felt across the nation. This can be verified by interviewing representatives of community organizations to understand their experiences with these programs. According to a *New York Times* article written by experienced journalist Stephanie Strom (2009), a representative of a community organization in Massachusetts dreads August because she knows that college students will stream through their doors causing havoc. Further, Strom (2009) writes that “volunteers... can be as much a curse as a blessing” to community organizations. In the world of nonprofits, free labor should never bring a feeling of dread to an organization leader. These feelings reveal the dangerous harm that select students have enacted within community organizations.

David D. Blouin, assistant professor of sociology at Indiana University South Bend, and Evelyn M. Perry, Ph.D. candidate in the

Department of Sociology at Indiana University (2009), also expose several negative impacts that service learning brings upon community partners. They argue that the costs of service learning outweigh the benefits when either the service brought risks to the group or it drained the group's resources. I agree with their assertion that the cost of service learning has the potential to be greater the benefits, yet I assert that a ten-hour service prerequisite will be effective in preventing unnecessary harm to the community. I will focus on three established negatives of service learning that could be counteracted by a service prerequisite.

The first is the lack of long term commitment that many students give to the community organizations. A study done by Andrea Vernon, the director of the Office of Civic Engagement at the University of Montana, and Kelly Ward, Vice Provost for Faculty Development and Recognition and Professor of Higher Education at Washington State University (1999), revealed the challenge that short-term commitments brought to organizations. In an interview with one agency director, frustration was expressed with service learning hour requirements that prompted students to stop serving after they reached the necessary hours (Vernon & Ward, 1999). Most of the projects that he wanted to assign would therefore be longer than the student's service requirement (Vernon & Ward, 1999). A service prerequisite would counteract this issue. If students were required to serve in the same organization prior to enrolling in their service learning course, they would dedicate a full year to the specific community organization, thus allowing for longer student commitments. The study by Vernon and Ward (1999) also addresses the struggle of scheduling college students, as their time is limited by classwork, families, and jobs. This makes it very difficult to reach the twenty hours that Roehlkepartain (2007) suggests is necessary to reach reciprocity in service learning. However, if students enroll in the course, they will have already served half of that time, making it much less stressful to reach the twenty total hours in order to achieve reciprocity.

The next argument responds to the harmful emphasis students put on educational projects. Vernon and Foster (2002) found that many organizations shared the perception that students only served because it was a class requirement, which was reflected in their lack of motivation and poor work quality. Their attendance was intended solely to receive credit for their hours rather than to effectively engage with the community

and within the organizations (Vernon & Ward, 2002). Along the same lines, Joan Clifford (2017), assistant professor at Duke University, described an instance when a student was encouraged by the community organization to interact with a refugee family. The student, too focused on completing a service project, did not focus on the relationship with the family, showing the priority several students place on the educational requirements rather than the reciprocal relationships. The requirement of service hours will serve as a preemptive deterrent to students whose focus is entirely to gain credit or to finish a project because few college students would do extra work where it is not required. Many students would simply choose another course if they did not feel motivated to serve reciprocally, thus leaving only driven students to take these courses.

This weeding out process would eliminate many of the negative effects of service learning, including the third and final argument: students lack punctuality and attendance, bringing great harm to community organizations. Because organizations put a lot of their limited resources into training student volunteers, when students do not show up, the organization is hurt in two ways. The first is that each staff member will have to take on more work as a result of the absence, and the second is that the organization wasted its precious resources in training a student that does not make that sacrifice worth it. However, non-attendance and lateness does not only hurt the organization, but they also hurt the community the organization serves. This in turn reflects poorly upon the community organization. Vernon and Foster (2002) found that, especially in youth programs, attendance and punctuality are vital, as the children can be deeply hurt if his or her mentor does not come. A time prerequisite would reveal this pain and hardship that the children and the organization face simply because students would inevitably see it first-hand within their volunteer time. The prerequisite time that students spend in the organization also gives the students a better understanding of the organization, the staff members, and the community, which would allow the student to communicate more effectively with all of the aforementioned individuals. The student would have a more personal relationship with the organization, and thus would be less likely to accidentally harm the community. Further, spending more time in the organization would grant students more opportunity to identify the needs of the community partner. This knowledge would allow for more effective

service projects and less stress while creating them. The student would thus be able to make contributions of higher quality that actually may make a difference.

Conclusion

I acknowledge that there are several limitations to this paper, one of which is that I focus nearly entirely on the negative effects of service learning. In fact, most community organizations give very positive overall reviews of service learning students. While this is valid, that conversation has already been extensively developed by the scholarly community. Knowing that there are many positive effects of service learning is not enough, however, as many organizations and communities all across the nation are harmed in the process of service learning. It is necessary that universities act to prevent future community harm through service learning by requiring ten hours of service as a prerequisite to any service learning course a student decides to take. The time that a student will put into the community before beginning their service learning course will lay the foundations for the student and the community organization to reciprocally benefit. Until no community organization is harmed by service learning, we as responsible citizens must act, as any harm done to a community is too much harm.

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