
Best-Of Undergraduate Student Research

Relationships Among Community Service, Civic Engagement Attitudes, Self-esteem, and Social Competence

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The following paper is the second of our Best-Of Student Research. Papers considered for publication must be researched, including all data collection, by a student in the School of Business at Utah Valley State College. The paper must also be accepted and presented at the National Conference of Undergraduate Research (NCUR) or another academic conference. This paper was supervised by Dr. Susan R. Madsen.

Civic engagement and service are societal elements that help sustain and support community needs. In recent years, emphasis has been placed in institutions of higher education to instill service-learning programs that give students structured learning experiences in the community. These experiences are expected to enable students to develop academic and leadership skills, self-esteem, social competence skills, tolerance for others, and empathy regarding the need for community service. The purpose of this study is to determine if students who participate in service-learning or community service have a higher sense of self-esteem and social competence than students who do not.

Key Words: Service-Learning, Social competence, Civic engagement

Introduction

Civic engagement and community service are societal elements that help sustain and support community needs. Service is beneficial to the community and is often dependent on volunteers. Singer, Green, and Barr (2002:536) stated, "Civic responsibility entails participation in activities that seek to enhance the quality of the overall society and its diverse constituents[—] not simply one's own life or the lives of one's own life or the lives of ones immediate circle." Volunteer work is also widely believed to benefit the individual who performs the service (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001).

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this research is to determine if a relationship exists between self-esteem, social competence, and service-learning or community service. Do service-learning participants have a higher sense of self-esteem and social competence? Do the civic engagement attitudes of service-learning

participants differ from the attitudes of those who are not participating in community service? Many studies have indicated the positive outcome of service-learning, but the attitudes of service-learning participants in community service involvement have not been studied in depth. This study provides insight into these attitudes. The research questions for this study are:

- Do students who spend more time in community service have a higher self-esteem?
- Do students who are involved in community service improve their social skills?
- Do service-oriented students have higher self-esteem and social competence levels?
- Do students who are not involved in community service have different attitudes about community service than those who are involved?

Theoretical Framework

Personal attitudes, which often form at a young age, influence motivation for involvement in community service. Adolescents and college students may already have developed attitudes about community service that can be difficult to change (Fiske & Talyor, 1991).

Many theoretical models have been built to try to describe personal attitudes in individuals. This research primarily uses Schwartz's (1977) helping behavior model and the personal values that are identified by this model. According to Schiarella, McCarthy and Tucker, "Schwartz's (1977:299) model of helping behavior is a useful framework for understanding how people decide . . . to become involved in community service."

Schwartz's (1977) model is divided into four phases and is assessed subconsciously at each level by the individual. The first phase measures the perception of a need to respond. At this phase, the individual recognizes that someone else is in need and determines if they can and want to help this person. The second phase measures the obligation to respond. Does the individual feel any moral or ethical obligation? Does the obligation arouse any internal values within the individual to be helpful? Phase three allows the individual to measure and reassess potential responses, costs, and probable outcomes of helping. The final phase measures the intention of engaging in community service; is the individual going to participate or not?

This can be illustrated by associating individual or student experiences during service-learning or community service. When helping a community member in need, students are likely to feel responsibility for (phase 1) and have an empathetic experience with those they help (phase 2) (McCarthy & Tucker, 2002: 633).

Attitudes and helping behaviors are evident in individual self-esteem and social competence levels, and influence involvement. This paper will explain the fundamental importance and underlying factors of self esteem and social competency. It will also discuss why individuals get involved in community service, and how individual attitudes affect behaviors as explained in the helping behavior model.

Literature Review

According to McCarthy and Tucker, (2002:632), "helping behavior covers a multitude of circumstances in which people come to the aid of others, ranging from situations where social pressures induce helping to situations where personal norms and values induce helping." Three processes (often intertwined) can explain helping behavior: a) emotional or empathic arousal, b) activation of social expectations, and c) activation of self-expectations.

Individuals reflect self-esteem through their responses to the demands of everyday life. Believing that one can make a difference to self and others has been a powerful predictor of active citizenship participation (Niemi & Associates, 1974). Bandura (1997) claims this belief shows the ability to act effectively and sustain purposive action in the face of obstacles.

Believing is also associated with identity development (Waterman, 1997). Community service volunteers may possess more physical and psychological resources than non-volunteers (Thoits and Hewitt, 2001). These resources facilitate involvement in volunteer work and are subsequently enhanced by such work. Community service volunteers generally have a sense of well-being, are healthy, and have a positive attitude about their society (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001).

Barksdale (1989) stated that the ultimate motivation behind all needs is the need to universally *feel good*. Community service volunteers consist of all age groups and are involved for a variety of reasons. Teenagers report that they are involved because it "makes them feel good" (Saftner, 1998, p.18) and that participating in community service creates a good physical feeling, called *helper's high*. Other reasons for volunteering are college admission requirements, learning new skills, roots in the community, duty to the community, fun, and involvement of friends (Saftner, 1998). Singer et. al., (2002:537), stated:

Civic responsibility extends from basic political participation and charitable donations to membership in community organizations to the active pursuit of social justice through work in public and

private institutions, non-profit organizations, and social service professions, including teaching, social work and public health.

Service-learning

Service-learning is a “credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity in such a way that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher 1995: 112). Research has explored various aspects of service-learning such as determining definitions, promoting service-learning, and establishing it as a credible educational practice. Authors McCarthy and Tucker (2002:631) discussed how service learning can reform classroom pedagogy and make it more relevant. Other authors have measured the outcomes of service-learning, demonstrating levels of increased civic engagement attitudes, self-esteem, leadership skills, teamwork skills, and social competency. Eyler and Giles (1999) found that service-learning involvement can also reflect an individual’s development of self awareness and tolerance for others.

Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcott, and Zlotkowski (2000:673) indicated that these experiences “help students develop greater self-awareness and appreciation of and tolerance for others.” Mabry, (1998:32), suggested that “potentially, service-learning is a tool for student acquisition of academic concepts and critical thinking skills as well as civic values.” Determining what constructs a sense of civic responsibility entails analysis of social behaviors and personal attitudes that affect self identity. Research indicates that participation in community service programs leads to increased commitment to service (Kendall et al., 1990; Sagawa & Halperin, 1993 as cited in Eyler and Giles, 1994). There is less literature concerning a relationship between self-esteem and social competency levels examining of how this attribute might affect individual social behaviors and their interactions within the community.

Social Behavior Engagements

A spectrum of human characteristics affect social behaviors that in turn influence intent to participate in community service.

Service-learning engagement. Service-learning increases the self-awareness and self-esteem of participating students. Service-learning allows students to be passionately involved in community service. This sometimes happens when students find themselves getting to know someone whose life is dramatically different than their own. This creates personal growth and fosters continued interest in community service. Eyler and Giles (1999) stated, “this personal growth in service learning can change personal attitudes and values, feelings of connectedness and commitment to the community and interpersonal skills” (p. 15).

Social Behaviors

For the purpose of this paper, social behaviors will focus primarily on the human characteristics of self-esteem and social competence because these as behaviors work together to create the relationship that enables of civic attitudes. Self-esteem will be limited in this paper to personal and social aspects. Social competence relates to self identity in terms of personal social self-esteem applications, particularly in the area of confidence when dealing with the world.

Personal Self-esteem

Branden (1994) stated that self-esteem it is a fundamental human need. Those with sufficient self-esteem have confidence in their thinking and coping. Self-esteem creates feelings of worthiness and the entitlement or right to success and happiness. Self-esteem inspires behavior. Low self-esteem manifests itself in depression, suicide, and other antisocial behaviors (Ashmore, Jussim, 1997).

Social Self-esteem

Social self-esteem affects how we interact with other people. Ashmore and Jussim (1997:109) stated, “selves cannot exist without society and society cannot exist with selves.” Because the positive regard of others is rewarding, individuals are

motivated to modify their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to conform. (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997). Branden (1994) correlated a healthy self-esteem with rationality, realism, intuitiveness, creativity, independence, flexibility, ability to manage change, willingness to admit mistakes, benevolence, and cooperativeness.

High self-esteem seeks the challenge and stimulation of worthwhile and demanding goals, and reaching such goals nurtures such goals. Poor self-esteem appears to be related to irrationality, blindness to reality, rigidity, inappropriate conformity rebelliousness, or over controlling behavior, and fear of or hostility toward others (Ashmore & Jussim, 1997).

Methods

This research was conducted using a questionnaire survey instrument which is validated with a reliability score ($\alpha = .73$). This study was distributed to students at two large universities in the western United States.

The instrument was composed of two scales; the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI) scale by Helmreich and Stapp, (1974) (short form) was used to measure the self-esteem and social competence. The Civic Attitude Scale by Mabry, (1998) was used to measure the civic attitudes of the students in this sample. Demographic information was gathered including gender, age, health, college major, college year, marital status, whether they had children, and hours currently involved in community service.

The 16-item Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI) is commonly used by personality and social psychologists as a measure of self-esteem (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). The measure focuses on perceived competence and confidence in social situations. The instrument measured on a scale between 1 and 5, with 1 being "not at all characteristic of me" to 5 "very much characteristic of me". The TSBI was analyzed in two sections. First items were analyzed in reference to the individual's personal self-esteem. Questions such as "I would describe myself as self-confident" and "I cannot seem to get others to notice me" were used as personal self-esteem items. Other items were analyzed that related to social self-esteem questions such as "I have no doubts about my social

competence" and "I enjoy social gatherings just to be with people". Six negatively worded items were reversed.

The Civic Attitude Scale consists of a 5-item scale measuring a range from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". It is used primarily to measure attitudes toward community service. Sample questions were: "Adults should give some time for the good of their community or country", and "people, regardless of whether they've been successful or not, ought to help others". The questions presented in the survey could have been answered from the perspective of yes, someone should be involved in community service or yes, I should be involved in community service. Therefore, results of student attitudes could be interpreted differently.

The questionnaires were distributed to four different classes; three general education classes and one upper division class. An approved letter of consent from the institutional review boards were presented to the students explaining the purpose of the study, the process, and that the study was confidential. After the letters were read, the surveys were distributed to the students. Most students completed the survey within 10 minutes. Students were asked to place the finished questionnaires in an envelope which was collected and returned for analysis.

The research participants consisted of 95 males and 74 females. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed with a return rate of 86 percent. These students were selected because their professors were willing to allow distributions of questionnaires in the classroom.

Results

Hours of community service were measured in service given in the month previous to the study. Responses indicated that 32 percent did not give hours towards service, and 55 percent gave between 1 to 5 hours of service. Four percent of the participants gave more than 11 hours of service during the course of the month.

Table 1
Demographic Data

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	95	56.2
Female	74	43.8
Age		
<21	96	56.1
22-26	64	42.2
27-33	10	5.8
>34	1	.6
Health		
Good	153	89.5
Fair	17	9.9
Poor	0	0
College Major		
Business	11	6.4
Education	11	6.4
Sciences	31	18.1
Engineering	5	2.9
Undecided	38	22.2
Generals	7	4.1
I.T.	22	12.9
Paralegal	5	2.9
Psychology	4	2.3
Accounting	4	2.3
Other	33	19.3
Year in College		
Freshman	81	47.6
Sophomore	45	26.5
Junior	14	8.2
Senior	30	17.6
Marital Status		
Single	139	81.3
Married	32	18.7
Divorced	0	0
Children		
0	163	95.9
1	3	1.8
2 +	4	2.4
Hrs of Service		
0	54	31.8
1-5 hr week	93	54.7
6-10 hr	16	9.4
11 +	7	4.1

The means of the primary study constructs were above average. The social behavior means were slightly above average ($M=3.55;SD = .39$) indicating that the participant's self-esteem is somewhat high. The high means ($M=4.27; SD = .76$) of the civic attitudes indicated that the students had high perceptions of the importance and need for service in the community.

Findings of the Pearsons correlations were statically significant. Results indicated that both civic attitude and hours of service ($r=.250$) and social behavior and hours of service ($r=.248$) were positively linked (See table 2). Social self-esteem and hours of service have a very high statically significant correlation ($r=.259$) as well. Results also indicated strong correlations between social behavior and health ($r=.187$), but there is no correlation between social behavior or civic attitudes and any other demographic characteristics or attributes in this study. No correlation exists between the measurement of self esteem and social competence of individuals and the measurement of adult civic attitudes.

Table 2
Significant Correlations Table

	Hours of Service	Health
Social Behavior		.187*
Social Behaviors	.248**	
Civic Attitudes	.250***	
Social Self-esteem	.259***	

*P < .05 ** P < .01 *** P < .001

Discussion

This research reveals a strong correlation between actual hours of service and individual behaviors, and civic engagement and social self esteem levels. The high mean of 4.27 on the Civic Engagement Scale showed that overall, the students believed or had a positive attitude that they should be involved in community service. Although the statistical mean was high, the questions could have been interpreted and answered in a variety of ways. For instance, one item asked “should adults be involved for the good of their country or community?” The response may have been “yes”, but the meaning could range from, “my neighbor should”, “the army should”, “my parents should,” to, “someday I will be involved in community service”.

As with any research, some limitations are present. The research was conducted in a small geographical area and it would be beneficial to research in the future other geographical areas to obtain more diversity. The questionnaire specifically asked about the number of hours of service given monthly. Future research should separate voluntary community hours and hours spent on service-learning courses. Research could also explore detail of student histories with community service, what type of community service they performed, and why they were involved.

Conclusion

Measuring levels of volunteerism characteristics could explain civic engagement behaviors and attitudes, and determine what motivates or influences student involvement in community service. Those

with high levels of self-esteem and social competence are more likely to participate in community service.

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