

Service Learning in Higher Education

Michael Polgar, PhD

Penn State University

76 University Dr., Hazleton PA, 18202, USA

Abstract

Research shows growing numbers and proportions of volunteers in the United States learn and serve communities. Within this evolving community service system, gender intersects with (often voluntary) service work. Research shows how women and girls are socialized within service systems to learn and accept gendered social roles. Gender may also be related to college student attitudes towards service learning. Annual data from first year students entering college over four years at a small public university campus show that both men and women are satisfied with experiences that involve community service. However female students are have more positive attitudes towards performing service and male students are comparatively less enthusiastic.

Key words: education gender community service learning volunteering

1. Introduction

Volunteers of all kinds, driven by a variety of motivations, have long contributed to public life (Musick and Wilson, 2008). Gender and many other variables help us understand variations in attitudes, roles, and behaviors among volunteers (Rotolo and Wilson, 2007; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1986). Notable research on gender differences includes findings of sex segregation; men are more often working in or assigned to leadership roles in voluntary organizations and groups, while women are more often selecting or found in ‘helping’ roles, like food service. Such gendered volunteering is more pronounced in some arenas, including youth sports (Messner 2009, 2011). Gender differences in volunteer or service work echo inequalities of social roles and time-use among women and girls, who more often perform many forms of housework (Hochschild and Macuhung 2012) and care work (Glenn 2010, Taniguchi 2006). Social research also shows gender differences at different times during the life-course, including among elder volunteers (Kahn, McGill, and Bianchi, 2011).

Volunteering has also been shown to have health and social benefits for participants, increasing eudemonic and social well-being (Son and Wilson, 2012) for many types of volunteers, regardless of gender and other variables (Morrow-Howell et al., 2003). Modern service programs have used community service work to increase the variety of roles available to volunteers. These include various forms of service learning in education, such as pre- or post-curricular programs that have grown well beyond the scope of traditional (and sometimes unpaid) forms of volunteer work. National service to US communities has a widening and significant scope. Notably, community service is more commonly performed in the USA by women (29%) than by men (23%) (CNCS 2015). Service to communities has expanded and become a vocational training ground, as well as a sign of good work; it is now a legally mandated national and federal goal in the United States (Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) 2012). Civic education, which includes service learning, is mandated and supported by multiple federal policies and also part of the mission and principles of most educational institutions. Some forms of civic education include a focus on communities, civic participation, and multicultural respect. Civic education stands in contrast to ‘civic minimalism’ (less should be done by government) that attempts to reduce the powers of government to guide public learning (Gutmann 1999). Leaders in higher education build on research supporting the idea that civic education, including service learning, helps students engage in and stay in college to earn credentials, obtain marketable skills, and develop social responsibility through civic participation (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012).

Sociological research on volunteers and service learning describes and details a variety of individual and group variations in both attitudes and behaviors (Blouin and Perry 2009; Hollis 2002; Marullo, Moayed and Cooke 2009; Mobley 2007; Sullivan-Catlin 2002).

Service learning is also a part of professional education and training, in social work (Lemieux and Allen 2007) and in many other fields. Extensive research in sociology and education shows that service learning has its strongest effects in fostering student responsibilities (Eyler 2002). Helping and working with communities is more fully defined as service learning if and when it involves learner reflection and is effectively integrated with students' academic curricular goals. Service learning in primary, secondary and higher education has the wider effect of fostering civic participation for entire communities as part of democratic education (Gutmann 1999), providing both academic and more general (civic) benefits for student learners, community organizations, and people in need.

2. Service Learning in Higher Education

Research in a variety of contexts shows that service learning is helpful to many aspects of both higher education and host communities (Ostrow, Hesser and Enos 2005); academic authors find specifically that cooperative experiences in service learning activities promote development of skills like teamwork, community involvement, and citizenship (Eyler 2009). Research shows that service learning has a variety of benefits for many diverse populations, and that *higher quality* experiences have better outcomes (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). Service learning is mutually beneficial, a 'two-way street' with positive outcomes for both helpers (Son and Wilson 2012) and 'helpees' (Blau 2005).

Research helps promote a variety of service learning models, including those in higher education (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). More than 70 percent of all college students report participating in some form of volunteering, community service, or service learning during college. About one-half of college students report participating in credit-bearing service learning activities during their time in college. The more frequently students participate in civic learning practices, the more they make gains on a variety of civic outcomes.

Service learning is a widely used part of 'extra' or co-curricular education, sometimes part of a first-year student experience (Musil 2009), that develops individual and social responsibilities in many courses and curricula, including sociological research methods (Potter, Caffrey and Plante 2003). The (often educational) quality of service work is both legally mandated and supported by the Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009 (CNCS, 2012). When service learning is part of educational curricula, it may be an aspect of both courses (such as internships and higher-level projects) and of general education or student activities (such as a service project during new student orientation, described below). Attitudes and behaviors towards expansion of education into service, often described in terms like 'outside the classroom' or 'in communities,' often vary by group, especially by gender. Service learning is "a strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities." (Engberg and Fox 2011) Community service and service learning are thus legally mandated, funded, and encouraged in educational settings and in diverse communities.

While research results in sociology and education have supported many uses and benefits of service learning, fewer theories or studies have attempted to explore or explain empirical findings that show women and girls more often aspire to and perform service learning activities (Rotolo and Wilson 2007). Fewer still try to specify this gendered dynamic specifically among college students. Educational research with large samples of US college students shows that women are more likely to have an orientation towards community service (Sax 2008). This suggests women may have greater attachments to community, as predicted by influential feminist theorists (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1993).

First, gender is recognized as a primary frame that helps explain many forms of persisting social inequalities (Ridgeway 2009). A gender system operates within and justifies gendered roles and status relationships that are unequal, despite the fact that research shows few behavioral differences between men and women (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). This helps explain why men and women are perceived to be fundamentally different and why male privilege is pervasive, even while people quite commonly interact across gender distinctions. Cultural beliefs about gender include the stereotypes that women are more cooperative and nicer, but less worthy of status (Ridgeway and Correll 2004), while men are privileged as more instrumental and competent. As a result, interactions in public build on this 'gender game' and some historical gender inequalities remain.

In addition, female interdependence and cooperation may be misconstrued and cast as dependency and social debt (Fineman 2006), creating additional social inequalities that devalue women's cooperative work both for wages and for family and community through household care and caregiving. Women and girls are more actively socialized into the duties to care for families and relationships through emotional labor and family work (Hochschild and Machung 2012), a second work shift 'given' to women and girls in addition to wage labor, creating derivative dependencies wherein women are given disproportionate responsibilities for unpaid or underpaid care work (Fineman 2006). Thanks to gendered systems, women have been contributing to society through interdependent services to families and communities based on persistent gendered divisions labor, sometimes requiring more active interdependence or teamwork (Finley 2012). In moving towards family-friendly workplace policies and other interventions to reduce competency biases against women, society reduces gender inequalities without necessarily 'ending' gendered differences or gender systems (Ridgeway and Correll 2000). How does gender matter in the context of community service learning for students starting college? Are the attitudes of female students significantly different from those of male students? The following empirical research addresses these questions through a four-year study of one campus community.

3. Methods: Subjects, Measures, and Hypotheses

3.1 Subjects

For each of four consecutive years, at a small campus of a large state-supported University, a one-day community service project involved over 300 new students in a service learning experience. Community service was part of new student orientation at the start of each fall semester. A service-learning event was designed to involve the entire first-year cohort (a full population) of new students at one campus. A 13-item questionnaire was distributed to all students immediately after they completed their service work (see Appendix A). Most participants completed this brief survey. This survey methods were approved through the University's human subjects review process and conducted (in part) to evaluate the quality of student experiences. Students in assigned groups of twenty completed a variety of volunteer activities at multiple community organizations, including nursing homes, parks and trails, and other social service agencies. Incoming first-year students, led by one faculty or staff and one student leader, participated in about 2.5 hours of work prior to a complementary group meal for the entire incoming cohort. Participants rode school buses to a service agency or site in the local community. Sites were selected from among local non-profit agencies by the campus student activities staff. During the ride to the site, group leaders informed students about the service activities. On the ride back from the site, leaders circulated a brief questionnaire to the students, gathering fixed-choice and written responses to simple questions.

3.2 Measures

A brief questionnaire was designed to evaluate the quality of the new student experience, measuring a limited variety of attributes of community service learning that were identified to be important by earlier research and organizations. The first and most important evaluative outcome measure was simply whether students were satisfied with the one-time service learning experience. Then students then identified their age and gender. A series of seven items measured specific student attitudes in response to the service learning experience (see Appendix A). These attitudes reflect important dimensions of student experiences within student service learning (Blouin and Perry 2009; Bringle and Hatcher 1996; Lewis 2004; Marullo, Moayedi and Cooke 2009; Mobley 2007; Potter, Caffrey and Plante 2003). Fixed response categories rated community service experiences as more or less challenging, educational, fun, social, helpful, inclusive in community, and everyone's responsibility. These aspects were evaluated on a five-point scale and then sometimes reduced to dichotomies for analysis (see Tables 1 and 2). Finally, students reflected on and simply appraised their attitudes towards community service before their participation and at present (immediately after participating).

Researchers measured two (dependent variable) dimensions of service learning: student attitudes and student evaluations of experiences. Attitudes are measured both retrospectively (Before doing service learning, were you looking forward to community service?) and prospectively (Do you now want to participate in future service projects?). Evaluation of experience, measured as student satisfaction with the one-day project, was generally satisfactory in this study (and therefore this variable is not subject to much explanation or analysis across gender: see Appendix A). A third and important dimension, the volunteer role or nature of student service behaviors, are controlled (though not experimentally) in this context by the design of the service learning project. All research subjects did a short stint of work that they did not select.

All subjects described below experienced the same duration of work during one-day service project, although students had different experiences both prior to and during the project.

3.3 Hypotheses

First, since gender role socialization and gender differences in roles have been found to be pervasive in gender systems, and since previous research finds women are more likely to both support and perform volunteer and community service work, researchers expected *significant differences between male and female college students in attitudes (dispositions) towards recently past and future community service*. Specifically, women are more often socialized to be cooperative and helpful to others (including through second shifts of care-work and housework) and women work more often without extensive compensation. Hypotheses follow previous social research to predict that women are often more optimistic (or less pessimistic about) an unpaid service-learning activity that has no credit or compensation attached. Second, researchers hypothesize that *first-year college women would express more favorable attitudes towards future community service activities*. Evidence supporting either of these two hypotheses can support the importance of gender in explaining variations in student attitudes and behavior, though it might not necessarily provide a full and complete explanation for such variations. Examining this relationship for multiple incoming student cohorts over time can help determine if gender matters uniquely among specific cohorts or alternatively if gender continues as an enduring predictor of attitudes and community service-related behaviors among college students.

4. Findings

Incoming female college students were significantly more likely than new male students to express an optimistic and positive attitude, both towards their service learning experience and prospectively towards future community service projects. Table 1 (Row 1) shows that new *female students were more favorably predisposed to service* (59% to 43%) and this difference in service predispositions is statistically significant (Chi-square = 8.8, $p = .00$). Data also show a pattern that is well established across multiple and prior years (Table 2). There is also a *statistically significant difference in prospective attitudes towards future community service* (women would choose to serve again more often than men, 85% to 68%, Chi-square = 8.8, $p=.00$). In contrast, there is no gendered difference in overall satisfaction with the service experience (women and men report equally high levels across multiple years). This last finding may reflect one evaluation of one type of event more so than attitudes towards service activities as a whole, and also allows for a smaller degree of variation to be explained. Results in Table 1 (rows 4-6) also show no *significant* difference in evaluations of the reported *value* of community service, though women were more likely to consider service *helpful and everyone's responsibility*. This finding is also consistent with comparisons from earlier years.

Table 2 shows again that *positive dispositions and future predispositions to serve through community services are significantly more common among women than men*. This finding holds across multiple cohorts and years. However, only in one year were women significantly more likely to be satisfied with the service learning experience. It is notable that in no year was there *any* indicator that reflected that male students had a more positive attitude toward or evaluation of service learning. Thus findings across multiple indicators consistently show a gender difference among new college students evaluating the same set of community service experiences. Women consistently express greater intention to perform community service both in the present and in the future.

5. Limitations

These research results and comparisons have clear limitations. Our methods are limited in scope. First, they reflect only college students at one campus evaluating only one day's community service work. As such, these data do not represent wider populations. Findings reflect only an early-stage and one-time form of college student service work, and so both the nature and variations in student attitudes may evolve over time. Research may well find different constellations of attitudes towards service work that has a longer duration, more focused educational goals, or specific developmental goals within a curriculum or a career (such as volunteering that is part of a research project, an internship, or an apprenticeship). Many student variables, including the extent of prior service experiences, were not fully measured and thus could not be part of a multivariate analysis. Issues of racial and ethnicity diversity, while pertinent to many other service learning projects that involve students of privilege (sometimes multicultural or diverse urban communities), were not part of this analysis. Finally, while measures of students in cross-sectional panels do provide longitudinal comparison but do not allow for any analysis of student attitudinal development over time, to develop or assess theories and hypotheses about student growth and development, as well as comparisons by gender.

Students reported that service learning work helped them to get to know their peers, to become helpful to others, and to increasing their feelings of community involvement, but most students did not find the work challenging or particularly educational. It may be reasonable to hypothesize that attitudes and behaviors related to service learning can be variable over time and context, and that these vary according to multiple independent variables beyond gender. For example, students who have more experience ‘working with people’ (often voluntarily and without wages) may become more skilled and more accustomed to it, developing identities and relationships (‘caring people person’) that turn a socialized or gendered personal quality into a career-building skill that can demand more respect and wages at some time in the present or future. Therefore attitudes and behaviors related to service learning likely change as people age, specialize, and respond to variable contexts. Some students volunteer directly in response to crisis-related events or emergencies (e.g. related to weather, flooding, poverty, homelessness, and other concerns). These context-specific behaviors, providing direct contact between students and groups of people with immediate needs, have been shown to engage and sensitize students to the need for service work (Polgar 2009; Stolley, Holtaling and Kiser 2008).

Future work should and will involve more extensive data sets and variables, elaborating more extensive measures and testable hypotheses about gender and community service through multivariate models. For the present, associations over time should help us recognize simply that gender matters and that gender can help explain variation in community service attitudes and behaviors among new college students. This may be related differences in gender socialization and gendered status relationships, but there is not enough data to rule out other factors or fully elaborate this relationship between gender and attitudes towards service learning. A learner’s developmental stage (indicated by age, educational status, and family status) may also matter, especially in the context of time allocation (e.g. service as freedom to help outside of primary social roles). Organizational context may matters as well, and thus future studies should consider educational stage and role, employment sector, and other variables.

6. Implications

This and other research finds that women in college have somewhat stronger community orientations than do men (Sax 2004; Sax 2008; Sax 2009). Social theories of gender studies have developed theories to explain why and how the gender system and inequalities (Ridgeway 2009; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999) reinforce women’s greater and often morally-based attachments to others and thus to local communities (Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1993). As a result, women select and experience both more voluntary work and more derivative dependencies as caregivers and uncompensated helpers, including as parents and caregivers, for families, communities, and specifically for people with disabilities (Fineman 2006).

In multiple contexts, variations in service experiences and behavior are possible and likely. Some of these may be shaped by gender in stereotypic ways (e.g. men are more likely to serve in military, women in other types of ‘volunteer’ work in the human or social service sectors). Other types of service may be more ‘equally’ influential and helpful to both men and women. Perhaps research can identify ways to increase male altruism and service work among boys and men specifically through programs for college students, closing the apparent but not-yet-problematized ‘gender gap’ in voluntary work and community-oriented behaviors. In any case, wide-scale college student community service, like service learning in education more generally, is supported by both research and national policies. There are many ways that gender shapes this process, helping future women and men, along with girls and boys, learn positive attitude towards service that promote and maintain strong community attachments. Research underscores the increasing and ongoing value that is generated by the many participants in community service, regardless of demographic distributions and social attitudes.

7. References

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Appendix A: Questionnaire Evaluating Service Learning

Please answer the questions below. Responses are voluntary, anonymous and will be used for campus planning and research purposes. Thank you.

1. Were you satisfied with your experience in today’s service learning project? [Circle one]: No=11% *Yes=89% (N=353)
2. Average (and modal) age: 18 years old (77%)
3. Gender: Male = 56% Female = 44%
4. Status: Student (100%)

For each item below, please circle a number to the right that best matches your own view of today’s service learning project.

My experience in this morning’s community service learning project...	Rate response to each statement (%)				
	<i>Not at all (0)</i>	<i>a little</i>	<i>somewhat</i>	<i>quite</i>	<i>totally</i>
5. ..was ____ challenging for me.	63	15	13	3	5
6. ...was ____ educational for me.	28	26	23	16	7
7. ...was ____ fun for me.	12	18	32	22	16
8. ...helped me get to know others.	2	7	25	30	36
9. ...was ____ helpful to others.	4	11	25	32	27
10. ...helped me feel part of a community	9	16	27	27	20
11. Service is everyone’s responsibility	7	6	17	28	42

Describe your views before and after today’s project (circle one choice):

12. Before today’s project, I did **want to participate** in community service (50%).

13. Now, I do want to **participate in future** community service projects (75%).

Please write any additional comments or suggestions below, and you may continue writing on the back of this page.

Table 1: Attitudes toward community service, by gender of respondent (study year #4)

Item	%	(Total N)	Gender (%)		Chi-square ϑ	p-value
			Male (56%)	Female (44%)		
1. Predisposed to want to participate in Community Service (CS)	50	(347)	43	↑59	8.8	.00**
2. Satisfied with CS experience	89	(344)	89	89	0	0.9
3. Would do more CS in future	76	(345)	68	↑85	13	.00**
4. Agree♦ CS experience was helpful to others	60	(319)	58	63	1.0	0.3
5. Agree♦ CS experience helped respondent feel part of community	48	(317)	49	46	0.3	0.5
6. Agree♦ CS experience is everyone's responsibility	71	(320)	68	74	1.5	0.2

Key:

↑ column percentage (of women) is significantly higher than comparison group (of men)

♦ full agreement includes responses of “totally” or “quite” atop a 5-point semantic differential scale (see appendix A).

ϑ Chi-square statistic tests expectation that there is no relationship between respondent gender and agreement in a 2x2 contingency table.

** p < .01

* p < .05

Table 2: Attitudes toward community service, by gender of respondent (study years 1, 2, & 3)

Item	%	(Total N)	Gender		Chi-square ϑ	p-value
			Male	Female		
Year 3: Predisposed to want to participate in Community Service (CS)	51	(320)	42	↑60	11.3	.00**
Year 2: Predisposed towards CS	49	(370)	44	↑56	5.7	.02*
Year 1: Predisposed towards CS	42	(288)	28	↑60	27.6	.00**
Year 3: Would do more CS in future	80	(318)	72	↑89	14.1	.00**
Year 2: Would do more CS in future	71	(369)	63	↑80	13.3	.00**
Year 1: Would do more CS in future	67	(284)	57	↑81	18.1	.00**
Year 3: Satisfied with CS experience	90	(320)	90	92	0.6	.60
Year 2: Satisfied with CS experience	88	(365)	91	85	3.1	.08
Year 1: Satisfied with CS experience	85	(295)	81	↑90	4.7	.03*

Key:

↑ column percentage (of women) is significantly higher than comparison group (of men)

ϑ² Chi-square statistic tests expectation that there is no relationship between respondent gender and agreement in a 2x2 contingency table.

** p < .01

* p < .05