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Reference Service-Learning: Does it Matter?

Katie E. Rasmussen, David A. Nelson, Ph.D.* Jason S. Carroll, Ph.D., & Sarah M. Coyne, Ph.D.

Introduction

Service-learning, a similar construct to experiential learning, is primarily defined by Eyler and Giles (1999) as any program that attempts to connect academic study with service. Service-learning has been linked to a myriad of positive outcomes for those who serve, including increased self-esteem and self-understanding, enhanced academic performance, increased moral reasoning, awareness of social responsibility, and advanced critical thinking abilities (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Stakus, Clay, & Snyder, 1999). Much of this evidence of positive effects, however, is derived from data that is largely qualitative, anecdotal and post-hoc in nature. Stakus and colleagues (1999) have suggested a need for more systematic assessment. The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of service-learning on a number of personal-developmental outcomes. Consistent with the suggestions of Stakus and colleagues (1999), we incorporated a pre/post assessment strategy to evaluate change over time more systematically with a sample of BYU undergraduate students. Moreover, we assessed service learning in an international context, such as the Romanian Orphanages internship in the School of Family Life (see photo of one group below). Given that an international experience (living abroad) may be challenging enough to provoke difficult but often positive change in many students, one may ask whether a service component enhances the personal growth that is in progress. Accordingly, we sought to control for international experience by comparing students who were enrolled in international service-learning vs. international study abroad programs (where students engage in little service as part of their academic experience). Our control group were BYU undergraduates who were enrolled in a typical on-campus semester or term. We hypothesized that those who participated in service-learning experiences, relative to the comparison groups, would experience greater growth in self-perceptions or valuing of religious identity (RI), cultural awareness (CA), balanced living (BL), lifelong learning (LL), and critical thinking (CT). We also expected study abroad participants to experience more growth than our control group participants, given the demands and opportunities of an international experience.

Method

Participants were 366 female BYU students (age range of 18-25 years, mean = 20.57 years). Male students were excluded from the sample as females outnumbered males by nearly 2:1 in the final dataset. Accordingly, due to prohibitive cell size for men, particularly in the service-learning groups, we elected to exclude males from further analysis. This sample is almost entirely composed of students belonging to the LDS faith (99.7% of the sample). Participants also did not differ in average age at the pre-assessment (across the service-learning, study abroad, and control groups). Over several years, we collected pre- and post- experiences for participants through a study abroad program, BYU international experiences, and 219 control group participants. Consent rates for study participation surpassed 75% across all groups. Students enrolled in international study programs were offered $10 for their participation in the pre- and post-surveys, full participation in each. Students in the control group were assembled from various classes across several majors and were given extra credit points for full participation. The surveys required approximately 1 hour to complete (35 minutes for the pre-assessment packet, 25 minutes for the post-assessment packet). The majority of student participants (control or otherwise) were involved in assessment over the course of a 14-week semester, though some students were involved in assessment just two to four months, service learning participants may have experienced significant change in the areas noted above (e.g., religious identity, cultural awareness, balanced living), lifelong learning, and critical thinking. The only domain in which the study abroad group was similar to the service-learning group was cultural awareness.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of international experience for young people in the development of self-perceptions and values. To explore these findings, we conducted a factor analysis of the instrument employed in this paper is a version of the BYU Alumni Survey (2001 edition), which was an international experience (living abroad) may be challenging enough to provoke difficult but often positive change in many students, one may ask whether a service component enhances the personal growth that is in progress. Accordingly, we sought to control for international experience by comparing students who were enrolled in international service-learning vs. international study abroad programs (where students engage in little service as part of their academic experience). Our control group were BYU undergraduates who were enrolled in a typical on-campus semester or term. We hypothesized that those who participated in service-learning experiences, relative to the comparison groups, would experience greater growth in self-perceptions or valuing of religious identity (RI), cultural awareness (CA), balanced living (BL), lifelong learning (LL), and critical thinking (CT). We also expected study abroad participants to experience more growth than our control group participants, given the demands and opportunities of an international experience.

Discussion

Consistent with study hypotheses, we found that international experience was the most significant predictor of change over time. In addition, we found that it was the service-learning group that experienced the most change over time in all five domains (i.e., religious identity, cultural awareness, balanced living, lifelong learning, and critical thinking). The only domain in which the study abroad group was similar to the service-learning group was cultural awareness.

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References


