

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

In the first section of this chapter, a brief synopsis of the study is provided. The second section discusses the conclusions drawn from the data analyses results. In the third section, the findings from this study are examined in relation to previous research. Implications for future practice and research are addressed in the fourth section, and the study's limitations are presented in the final section.

Synopsis

This study was conducted to examine the associations of civic attitudes in service learning. Civic attitude is a component of civic responsibility development. Civic responsibility is a combination of actions and attitudes associated with democratic governance and social participation. Attitudes related to civic responsibility include a belief in community service and appreciation of human differences.

In college, students have the opportunity to participate in community service through courses with a service component. Service learning (SL) is a form of experiential education that promotes active citizenship through partnerships between communities and universities. Instead of learning about social problems only in the classroom, students learn by actively participating in the community. These courses have the potential to increase students' motivation for learning and prepare them for citizenship by combining academics, service, and reflection. Coursework and reflection link the students' experiences in relation to greater social and personal issues.

Reflection is key to experiential education. It is a mental process of looking back on an experience and making meaning of the events in relation to one's world. Reflections can be accomplished through written or discussion activities either during class or outside of class.

To examine the associations of civic attitudes and service learning, survey research was used. Students at a large, mid-Atlantic, state university who were enrolled in a SL course during the Spring semester of 1999 were administered two surveys. Both surveys were voluntary for the instructors to administer and for the students to complete.

The first survey, the Service-Learning Participant Profile (pre-test), was administered to the SL students at the beginning of the semester. This survey elicited demographic information and also contained other items related to personal social responsibility, community service, civic awareness, motives for service participation and preconceived notions related to SL. Two hundred and ninety-seven students completed the pre-test.

The second survey, the Service-Learning Evaluation (post-test), was administered at the end of the semester. Only 161 students completed this survey. The post-test contained the items that comprised the Civic Attitude Scale and the items related to reflection pedagogy and reflection environment. It also contained questions related to future service. Other questions asked about personal social responsibility, community service, civic awareness, and motives for service participation.

This study examined the civic attitude scores of SL students in relation to demographic variables, frequency of reflection by pedagogy and environment, and the likelihood of future service. The data analyses were performed using demographic information from the pre-tests and the civic attitude scores, reflection, and future service information from the post-tests.

Mean civic attitude scores were derived from the four items that comprised the Civic Attitude Scale. The student characteristics used were gender, class year, and grade point average (GPA). The reflection pedagogy were written and discussion reflections, and the reflection environments were in-class and out-of-class. Future service was defined by continued service at

the SL site and future community service in general. Crosstabulation procedures and chi-square tests were used to examine the associations of the variables.

Conclusions

After the data were analyzed, the research findings were summarized. A series of conclusions were drawn from these summaries. A significant relationship was found between civic attitude scores and amount of variety in discussion reflection pedagogy. The out-of-class reflection environment also had a significant relationship with civic attitude scores. No significant associations between student characteristics and civic attitude scores were found in relation to type of reflection pedagogy and reflection environment. However, there were significant relationships between future service and civic attitude scores.

Reflection Pedagogy

There was a significant relationship between discussion reflection and civic attitude score. Talking with other students, the site supervisor, and the SL course instructor regarding service activities were the three types of discussion reflection provided on the post-test. The outcome of the performed analysis suggested that students who discussed their service activities with two or more of the people listed scored higher on civic attitude than those who talked to fewer than two of those people. This result indicates the importance of speaking with others related to the service activity in civic attitude development. Expressing thoughts and concerns through verbal and non-verbal communication aids the students in mentally processing their service experiences. The more interactions that take place between the students and those involved with the service project help the students develop their concepts of social responsibility.

Reflection Environment

A significant relationship existed between out-of-class reflection and civic attitude scores. During the semester, students reflected outside of the classroom. It was found that those participants who performed out-of-class reflections once a month or more scored higher on civic attitude than those who reflected only once or twice during the entire semester. This result suggests that those students who mentally process their service activities on their own time away from class more frequently tend to increase their civic attitude development. Perhaps students with higher levels of autonomy are more likely to reflect on their own time and thereby improve their civic attitude maturation process.

Student Characteristics

The student characteristics used in this study were gender, class year, and GPA. Regardless of reflection pedagogy or reflection environment, none of these student characteristics had a significant impact on civic attitude scores. These results suggest that students who participate in various forms of reflection pedagogy and reflection environments will benefit from SL courses regardless of their gender, year in college, or academic abilities.

Future Service

There was a significant relationship between civic attitude scores and future service participation. When asked whether they would participate in future community service activities, it was revealed that students who indicated a very good chance scored much higher on civic attitude than those who indicated little or some chance. This result suggests that students who had a greater desire to serve their community later in life also have well-developed attitudes related to civic responsibility. A lifelong commitment to serving the community is directly tied

to an understanding of one's ability for making a difference in society, serving others, and appreciating human differences.

Relationship to Previous Research

The findings from this study are consistent with previous research conducted regarding student volunteerism and SL. This study produced results that support previous research on reflection pedagogy and reflection environment. Also, similar findings from this study related to future service were found in previous research.

Reflection Pedagogy

Prior research on discussion reflection was supported by the results of this study. Discussion reflection was found to be a strong predictor of outcome measures related to learning, understanding, and application in previous research (Giles & Eyler, 1999). Discussion and application of service activities in the classroom were found to increase civic responsibility development (Myers-Lipton, 1998). In addition, a previous study using the same set of survey instruments found that discussion reflection affected changes in personal social values (Mabry, 1998). In support of these previous research studies, this study found that students who participated in discussion reflections with at least two different people (peers, instructors, or site supervisors) scored higher on civic attitude.

Reflection Environment

The finding of this study supported the results from a study performed regarding out-of-class reflection. Out-of-class reflection usually takes place when the student is not in an academic setting. Previous research found that reflecting after class is a means for the service experience to continue long after the experience is over and to provide a time for the development of ideas and values away from the classroom (Primavera, 1999). These previous

findings are reinforced by the findings in this study. It was found that students who reflected outside of the classroom more frequently than once a month scored higher on civic attitude.

Future Service

Similarities also existed in the results from this study and prior research related to future service participation. Previous researchers found that students who thought they were contributing to society were more likely to continue serving in the future. The research suggested that students increased their tendency to serve in the future if they served in their younger years and made personal connections with their service activities (Astin, 1999; McKenna & Rizzo, 1999; Yates & Youniss, 1998). This study found a direct correlation with the desire to serve in the future and civic attitude score. In support of the previous research, those who indicated there was a very good chance they would serve in the future had higher civic attitude scores than those who had less interest in future service.

Implications

The results from this study have implications for future practice and future research. The information gained can be used support the Service-Learning Center, potential SL instructors, and civic responsibility program development. Suggestions for future research are comparing SL students with non-SL students, examining the characteristic of ethnicity in relation to service participation and civic attitudes, and conducting a long-term study that tracks civic responsibility development.

Future Practice

First, the findings support the efforts of the Service-Learning Center (SLC). The SLC staff created the instruments and collected the data used in this study, so the information gained is directly applicable to the center. The SLC provides resources to instructors who have

incorporated SL into their curricula. The information from this study strongly suggests that discussion reflection is key to successful student development. These findings have the potential to further the SLC's efforts in providing direction and program ideas for future SL endeavors. Information such as what was found in this study should be shared with SL course instructors to prove the importance of having their students fill out the SLC survey instruments at the beginning and end of each semester.

Secondly, the results from this study can be used to assist new instructors who are considering incorporating SL into their course curriculum. From this study's outcomes, it was concluded that reflection be used in a variety of pedagogy and environments to increase civic attitude development. At least two forms of discussion (i.e., informal talks, formal interviews) reflection should be incorporated into a SL course curriculum in addition to academic assignments. It is also important to assign reflective activities that occur outside the classroom setting at least once a month. Instructors considering using service as part of their course will be increasing the likelihood of lifelong service participation by getting college students involved in the community at a young age.

Finally, the information gained from this study can be used to encourage those who develop civic responsibility programming. Regardless of whether the program is related to SL, the same principles can be used for any program aimed at civic responsibility development. Reflection is key and should be incorporated into the program as much as possible. Depending on whether the program is short-term or long-term, the reflective activities may vary. The students should be assigned reflective discussion activities to do on their own time after or before the program in addition to reflection during the program. Discussions should be structured in a manner that aids the students in mentally processing their service experiences. The earlier in

their college careers the students are involved in service, the better their chances for future service will be. So it is suggested that civic responsibility programs be created and available for students beginning in their first year of college.

Future Research

This study only used participants who were enrolled in SL courses. To examine whether service and reflection impact civic attitude, another study could be conducted to compare SL students with non-SL students. Two samples of students could be used. Each group would be taking a class in the same discipline. For example, one group would be taking a sociology class that incorporates the components of service and reflection, and the other group would be a sociology class without service or reflection. A pre-test would be administered to both groups at the beginning of the semester measuring civic attitude and then a post-test measuring civic attitude would be administered again at the end of the semester. Comparisons could then be made between the amount of change experienced in each group to determine whether service and reflection impact a change in civic attitude.

The student characteristics of gender, class year, and GPA were used in this study. However, this study was conducted at a rural predominantly white institution and did not examine the characteristic of ethnicity in relation to service participation and civic attitude. A similar study could be conducted to analyze the impact of gender, class year, GPA, ethnicity, and type and location of institution using the same survey instruments. Two samples of students could be used from two different types of urban institutions. One sample of SL students could be taken from a predominantly white urban institution and another sample of SL students from a historically black urban university. The SL course curriculums would need to be as similar as possible. Each group would be administered the pre- and post-tests at the same time in the same

fashion. Then the data could be analyzed to examine how the characteristics of gender, class year, GPA, ethnicity, and type and location of institution impacts service participation and civic attitude development.

The data from this study were collected from one group of students who were enrolled in a one-semester SL course. To understand the long-term impact of service participation during and after college, a longitudinal study could be conducted to track civic responsibility development. First-year students who enroll in a SL course could be tracked throughout their college career. Perhaps a group of students could be formed who would commit to enroll in one SL course each year while they were in college. They would be administered a series of surveys to track their development during their four or five years of undergraduate coursework. Then, upon graduation, they would still be tracked. Surveys would then be administered in two-year intervals for 10 years. Such a study would provide information on the long-term impact and development of civic responsibility in students who participated in SL courses during and after their undergraduate years.

Limitations

This study had a variety of limitations. It was limited by the sample size, the participants in the sample, the questions on the instrument, and the ranges chosen for the civic attitude scores.

The size of the sample limited the transferability of the findings in this study to larger populations. Since only 161 of the 297 students completed both the pre- and post-tests, the usable sample was rather small. For unknown reasons, some students who completed the surveys did not fill in all the items. Therefore, of the 161 participants, there were an even smaller number of respondents who actually answered all the items being analyzed.

The participants in the sample limited this study. They were not equally distributed in each of the characteristics being analyzed. Additionally, they were not representative of the entire student population at the university. However, the university itself is not representative of higher education in the United States. Since most of them (95%) had previous service experience, it is hard to know whether they had high civic attitude levels before they took the SL course or if their attitudes were changed due to the course activities.

This study was limited by the items on the survey. Since the researcher could only conduct analyses related to the information elicited from the survey questions, there was no control over the definitions created for each topic in a section. The content and format were pre-determined. Therefore, the researcher was unable to create definitions or further questions by being limited to only the items listed on the survey.

The ranges chosen for the civic attitude scores limited this study. Since the scores were grouped in the ranges of 1.00 to 2.99, 3.00 to 3.99, and 4.00, the data resulted in a curvilinear pattern. The direction of relationship in the data analyses curved due to the manner in which the scores were grouped. The distribution of scores could have been more linear if the scores were classified differently. A classification pattern of 1.00 to 2.49, 2.50 to 3.24, and 3.25 to 4.00 might have shown a more linear pattern of civic attitude scores.