2014 Qualitative Study on Student Service

Results and Findings

SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY – CENTER FOR SERVICE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Author by: Bobby Wassel
Overview

To better understand the various outcomes our students achieve through engaging in ongoing service, the Center for Service and Community Engagement (CSCE) conducted a qualitative evaluation of students’ service experiences from the 2013-2014 academic year. 60 students who were connected to an ongoing service experience via the CSCE were randomly selected to answer four essay questions (see below) on what effect, if any, the service had on their development.

36 of the 60 students responded, resulting in a 60% response rate. The only demographic collected was gender – 42 females and 18 males were selected to participate originally, based on gender demographics of service participants overall at SLU (70% vs. 30%, females vs. males). 28 females and 8 males responded, thus females participated at a slightly higher rate.

Results

Results by question are found below. A thematic analysis of responses was conducted, and categories of response type were incorporated into an evaluation matrix for each question. Often, responses were categorized using a rating system similar to the Lichert scale. The number of students who fell into each category was subsequently highlighted in each matrix box.

Question 1. What kind of relationships did you form during your service experience? What did you learn from the people you served? Do you feel a stronger connection to that particular community, and/or the St. Louis community at-large?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount Learned from Organization and/or People</th>
<th>Strength of Relationships Formed</th>
<th></th>
<th>Not Very Strong/ Not At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Good Deal or Some</td>
<td>Strong/Moderate</td>
<td>15 (42%)</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Much or None At All</td>
<td></td>
<td>16 (45%)</td>
<td>3 (8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost all students (87%) formed Strong or Moderate relationships with those they encountered.

Less than half (47%) spent significant time commenting on what they had learned from those served.

Students seem to be forming relationships through their service, but not necessarily learning from those with whom they are serving.
Question 2. What connections did you make between your service experience and a larger issue(s) of social justice? What issues affect the particular population you worked with? Are you inspired to take greater action through other efforts, such as advocacy, civic engagement, etc.?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of Inspiration to Take Greater Action</th>
<th>Connection</th>
<th>No Connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Inspired or Somewhat</td>
<td>9 (25%)</td>
<td>4 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Very or None At All</td>
<td>16 (45%)</td>
<td>7 (19%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Connection to Social Justice vs. Greater Action

- Majority (70%) were able to articulate a larger issue of social justice that related to their service experience.
- However, 64% of students were not very or not at all inspired to take greater action on an issue of social justice through advocacy, civic engagement, etc.
- Most students who articulated a connection between their service and social justice, but who were simultaneously not inspired to take greater action through advocacy, etc., still mentioned a desire to continue to serve next year.
- Those 4 students who saw no connection to an issue of justice but were inspired to take greater action worked with either animals or the elderly, so perhaps they did not see those populations as having a larger issue of social justice associated with them.

Question 3. What effect did your service have on your career or vocational path? Did it reinforce or change what you want to do after graduation? What about your major or future coursework?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect on Major / Coursework</th>
<th>Positive Change</th>
<th>Positive Reinforcement</th>
<th>Negative Reinforcement</th>
<th>No Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>3 (8%)</td>
<td>5 (14%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Effect</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11 (31%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14 (39%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Relationships Formed vs. Amount Learned
(Note: Divided into four columns to reflect diversity of responses from students.)
3 students changed their career paths (and subsequent courses/majors) as a result of their service (Two inspired to enter healthcare, one inspired to teach).

Several students (45%) had their career/vocation choice positively reinforced; one however had theirs negatively reinforced – the student discovered that she no longer wanted to go into teaching after working in an after-school program.

Several students (39%) mentioned that their service experience had no effect on either their major/coursework or career/vocation choice.

Still, almost all of these students expressed a desire to be involved with service after graduation in whichever community they happen to be residing.

**Question 4. How did your faith and/or spirituality link to your service experience? Did it inform your service? Was your faith/spirituality strengthened, or unchanged?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect on Faith</th>
<th>Linkage of Faith and Service</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linked</td>
<td>Not Linked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthened</td>
<td>16 (45%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchanged</td>
<td>4 (10%)</td>
<td>16 (45%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4: Linkage of Faith and Service vs. Effect on Faith**

- Question 4. had the sharpest divide over responses; 16 students (45%) were able to link their faith to their service experience (or vice versa), and had their faith strengthened through the process.
- The same number of students however did not see the link between faith and service, and their faith lives remain unchanged. It should also be noted that several of these students self-disclosed that they were atheist/agnostic.
- The remaining students commented on seeing a link between the two, either through the organization they worked with, or the people they served, but did not comment on their faith being strengthened.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

Overall, while student responses were diverse in nature and varied on the continuum of service experience outcomes, a few key themes and conclusion can be drawn at the macro-level from the study:
Students are forming strong, meaningful relationships through their service, whether with the staff members working at the organization, the people they are serving, or fellow SLU students they encountered, but some are not learning from those they service.

Students are making connections between their service experiences and issues of social justice, but not necessarily inspired to take the “next step” and approach their engagement from a systemic level through advocacy, civic participation, etc.

The effect that a student’s service experiences has on his/her “vocational path” (coursework, major, career choice, etc.) is largely positive, at least in a reinforcing way.

There seems to be a stark contrast between students who are serving and their experience with faith – students either see a link between the two and have their faith strengthened through their service, or they see no link and their faith (if any) remains unchanged.

Based on the above key themes, the following are possible recommendations on how to enhance the effect that service has on students’ learning and development:

1.) Encourage students (perhaps midway through their experience) to consider what they are learning from the people they are serving with or the organization. Suggest ways in which to reflect on this periodically (journaling, etc.).

2.) Recommend to students who expressed a desire to take greater action on an issue of justice that they enroll in the annual Social Justice and Advocacy Training series, which will provide them with the knowledge and tools to begin working for social change. For others, suggest simpler forms of taking greater action (i.e. voting).

3.) Consider ways in which students who are inspired by their faith to serve, or who have their faith strengthened, can gather to reflect on their experiences. Encourage an exploration of what their faith says about justice (i.e. Catholic Social Teaching).