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## The impacts of mandatory service on students in service-learning classes

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### ABSTRACT

This naturalistic study examined differences in students' motivations for elective versus required service-learning (SL) classes. Students in two successive academic years' cohorts were surveyed by the SL center at a large Midwestern university. Analyses compared classes differing in requirements for community-based service. Students required to participate in community service as part of a class within a program required for admission to a university were less likely to: want to be involved in future community work; enroll in another SL class; and recommend their class, compared to other groups of students, including others from classes in which SL was required as part of the program in which students were enrolled. These findings suggest that students' motivations to participate in community-engaged activities are not shaped simply by whether or not community engagement is required in SL classes, but also by other factors including how the engagement opportunity is contextualized.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Attitudes; education;  
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Today, in the United States, over two million students devote their time and energy to service-learning projects (Bright Impact, 2013). Rhodes and Davis (2001) define service-learning (SL) as a pedagogical strategy in which students engage in academically linked community service to enhance their understanding of class concepts while contributing to and learning about their communities. Service-learning has been associated with many positive student outcomes, including increased academic performance, commitment to activism, choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). Nevertheless, it is unclear how universities should optimally structure SL, for requiring students to participate in activities like community service can weaken the positive relationship between service experiences and future intentions to participate (e.g., Stukas, Snyder, & Clary, 1999). To maximize civic engagement throughout students' lives, it is imperative to understand impacts of requiring participation in SL classes and community service on students' attitudes and motivations.

### Outcomes of service learning

Service-learning experiences have shown positive relations with student learning, values, and civic engagement, with effects that persist beyond college (Astin et al., 2000; Warren, 2012). SL has shown positive relations with an array of student learning outcomes compared with traditional classes (Warren, 2012). Astin and colleagues (2000) found that SL promotes values such as commitment to activism and increases chances of choosing a service career and planning to participate in service

after college. These benefits are significantly greater than benefits attained through being involved only in community service (Astin et al., 2000).

There is significant disagreement about whether or not SL should be required of students in order to gain positive benefits. Certain universities that require SL report that students have positive attitudes toward SL requirements (Moely & Ilustre, 2011). However, requirements can decrease interest and intentions for future behavior through the overjustification effect, namely, a process through which an external incentive decreases a person's internal motivation to perform a task (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973). Stukas et al. (1999) examined perceptions and future intentions of students required to volunteer in order to graduate. When students perceived volunteering as externally imposed, the positive relationship between volunteering and future intentions to volunteer was weakened, suggesting that requiring volunteering may adversely impact students' future intentions to volunteer.

### **The present study**

This exploratory study investigated how naturally occurring variability across classes in requirements to participate in SL was related to students' motivations to engage in future community work, motivations to enroll in future service-learning classes, and recommending the classes to other students. We also examined whether responses were related to demographic characteristics, for previous research has found women more likely to volunteer than men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Building on Stukas et al. (1999), we hypothesized that students required to be involved in SL classes would be less likely to: report intentions to engage in future community work; enroll in future SL classes; and recommend SL classes than students who chose SL experiences.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Data from a Midwestern research university's service-learning center were examined for the spring semesters of 2012 ( $n = 961$ ) and 2013 ( $n = 955$ ). For spring 2012, 68% of participants were female and 67% White. Spring 2013 percentages were 67% female and 70% White. All classes included a SL component; in some instances, students were required to take specific classes to fulfill requirements for majors, honors programs, or other program requirements. Classes were categorized using naturally occurring variability. Analyses compared classes in which SL was required with classes in which SL participation was voluntary.

### **Materials**

The present study analyzed archival data collected through surveys administered to all students enrolled in SL classes. The survey relevant to this research is a *class survey*, through which students provided information about the overall class and integration of SL into the class. It included mostly closed-ended items. The three analyzed in the present paper are "Do you plan to partake in other community work in the future?"; "As a result of this experience, would you enroll in another service-learning class?"; and "Would you recommend the class to other students?"

### **Procedures**

Examination of classes for which data were available revealed that "requiring service" varied in a number of ways. Some classes were required for student majors or as a part of specific programs, and some programs contained service-learning classes requiring students to conduct community service.

In one instance, students were required to participate in SL in a class as a condition of being admitted to the university. Overall, perceived external control varied in several ways. To make sense of the analyses, we separated participants into four groups based upon SL requirements. The groups are students who:

- (1) participated in SL by freely enrolling in a class that had a SL option ( $n = 296$ ,  $n = 173$ ),
- (2) freely enrolled in a class requiring participation in SL ( $n = 335$ ,  $n = 359$ ),
- (3) were required to take a class that required SL ( $n = 135$ ,  $n = 264$ ), or
- (4) participated in a program as a condition for admission to the university, and were required to take a class that required SL ( $n = 174$ ,  $n = 133$ ).

Groups were examined to see if they varied on demographic characteristics.

## Results

### Background analyses

Comparison of demographic characteristics of groups found racial/ethnic differences between the four groups in spring 2012 ( $\chi^2(3, N = 945) = 71.83, p = .03, \phi_c = .16$ ), with Group 4 being the most diverse. However, in spring 2013, no significant differences appeared ( $\chi^2(3, N = 935) = 29.80, p = .10, \phi_c = .10$ ). Groups differed significantly both years on gender ( $\chi^2(3, N = 945) = 32.93, p < .001, \phi_c = .13$ ) ( $\chi^2(3, N = 935) = 9.48, p = 0.2, \phi_c = .02$ ), with more females in Group 3 than the other three groups. Both years, Group 1 had a larger proportion of international students ( $\chi^2(3, N = 945) = 23.40, p < .001, \phi_c = .16$ ) ( $\chi^2(3, N = 935) = 43.45, p < .001, \phi_c = .22$ ). Finally, both years students in Group 3 were more likely to have taken prior SL classes ( $\chi^2(3, N = 939) = 67.70, p < .001, \phi_c = .16$ ) ( $\chi^2(3, N = 954) = 89.14, p < .001, \phi_c = .17$ ).

### Primary analyses

Because survey items were categorical, we conducted chi square tests. Spring 2012, the four levels differed significantly in *students' plans to participate in other community work in the future* ( $\chi^2(3, N = 940) = 9.20, p = .03, \phi_c = .10$ ), *reports of wanting to enroll in another service-learning class* ( $\chi^2(3, N = 673) = 44.34, p < .001, \phi_c = .18$ ), and *recommendations of the class to other students* ( $\chi^2(3, N = 959) = 233.04, p < .001, \phi_c = .49$ ). As Table 1 reveals, students in Group 4 responded less positively on all three questions.

**Table 1.** Group level responses to dependent measures.

Dependent Measure	Spring 2012			Spring 2013		
	No	Yes	Maybe	No	Yes	Maybe
Community work in the future						
Optional Class, Optional SL	4.10%	95.90%	NA	9.20%	90.80%	NA
Optional Class, Required SL	4.80%	95.20%	NA	6.10%	93.90%	NA
Required Class, Required SL	1.50%	98.50%	NA	7.60%	92.40%	NA
Required Program, Required SL	8.60%	91.40%	NA	11.30%	88.70%	NA
Future Enrollment						
Optional Class, Optional SL	7.90%	32.70%	59.40%	13.80%	27.60%	58.60%
Optional Class, Required SL	12.10%	35.80%	52.20%	14.90%	37.40%	47.70%
Required Class, Required SL	14.70%	41.20%	44.10%	15.60%	31.30%	53.10%
Required Program, Required SL	26.90%	15.80%	57.30%	20.00%	20.80%	59.20%
Recommendations						
Optional Class, Optional SL	7.90%	92.10%	NA	11.00%	89.00%	NA
Optional Class, Required SL	10.90%	89.10%	NA	9.90%	90.10%	NA
Required Class, Required SL	3.00%	97.00%	NA	8.30%	91.70%	NA
Required Program, Required SL	55.60%	44.40%	NA	47.60%	54.20%	NA

Spring 2013 the groups did not differ significantly *in students' plans to participate in other community work in the future* ( $\chi^2(3, N = 842) = 4.12, p = .25$ ). Consistent with 2012, groups differed significantly in whether they *would enroll in service-learning classes again* ( $\chi^2(3, N = 606) = 13.107, p = .04, \varphi_c = .10$ ), and whether they *would recommend the class to other students* ( $\chi^2(3, N = 945) = 135.19, p < .001, \varphi_c = .38$ ), with students in Group 4 less likely to agree (see Table 1).

Finally, as hypothesized, men were less likely to report planning to participate in other community work in the future than women across all groups, both Spring 2012 ( $\chi^2(1, N = 954) = 9.345, p = .01, \varphi = .10$ ) and Spring 2013 ( $\chi^2(1, N = 943) = 13.958, p < .001, \varphi = .12$ ).

## Discussion

Stukas and colleagues (1999) found that when students felt as though they were externally controlled, a positive relationship between prior volunteering and future intentions to volunteer was weaker. Results from our naturalistic study partially supported their work in that students required to participate in a program and to take a class requiring SL (Group 4) were significantly less likely to report *intentions to enroll in future service-learning* and were less likely to *recommend the class* compared to students in the other three groups. In contrast, students required to take a class including service responded similarly to students voluntarily selecting their SL class.

Background comparisons of the four groups found that students in Group 3 (required to take class with required SL) were more likely to have taken previous SL classes than the other three groups, providing a possible reason why their responses were not more like those of Group 4. Selection processes may have resulted in Group 3 students having more positive responses compared to other research in which respondents were comparable in prior experience (e.g. Stukas et al., 1999). Furthermore, many students in Group 3 participated in an honors program that was viewed as desirable, perhaps creating internal motivation. They could also withdraw at any point, possibly lessening perceived external pressure. Alternatively, drawing from self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), because students chose the honors program, class requirements might not violate their needs for autonomy, which is essential to motivation.

Demographic differences between groups cannot account for the findings with respect to Group 4, for if racial diversity produced the findings, the 2012 and 2013 years' findings would differ substantially. Gender likewise does not account for the findings, although the greater presence of women in Group 3, with higher levels of prior SL class-taking, is consistent with prior gender differences.

It is possible that this research has identified a very extreme reaction to external pressure to engage in SL (Group 4) as well as conditions under which external pressure does not affect responses (Group 3). Group 4 students were required to be a part of a program as a condition of being admitted and to participate in service in a required class, which may have led them to feel little control and shaped their responses. They also were eligible for a \$1,000 scholarship in their first year and \$1,000 scholarship in their fourth year, creating further external motivations. Further research in a controlled setting would help establish validity of our inferences, and further research exploring students' perceptions about the SL requirements would shed light on plausibility of such conclusions.

Ironically, Group 4 students were provided with other benefits, including professional advising, peer mentoring, and opportunities for engagement, which were intended to give them support to ensure a positive and successful experience at the university. If those students had been aware of specific opportunities of the program, in addition to the requirements, when they chose to enroll, perhaps their focus and reactions would have been different. Due to the archival nature of the study, however, we were not able to measure students' awareness or their perceptions of the requirements of the program. Because this university is selective (substantially fewer than half of the 40,000+ applicants are accepted), students in Group 4 had solid academic backgrounds. Many likely considered themselves strong students not needing extra help. Finally, in contrast to universities (e.g., Tulane, see Moely & Ilustre, 2011), where service requirements

are advertised as part of the school's mission, students in Group 4 may have been less motivated by SL classes due to lack of awareness of the SL requirement.

In conclusion, findings suggest that responses to SL opportunities are affected by how the opportunity is contextualized as well as whether community service is required. Although conjecture, it may be that if students are made more aware of requirements and expectations of classes and programs before they take SL classes or become engaged in community experiences, their experiences might change. Future research should also explore if requiring SL for students in the initial stages of adjusting to their college's demands may produce a burden that diminishes pleasure from being engaged in community work and motivation to engage in community work or to enroll in SL classes in the future. In sum, in addition to whether or not community service is required, factors like the context of the program, the way it is presented, and the nature of the requirement seem important in influencing future community engagement.

## Notes on contributors

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