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Community services in higher education

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Community services in higher education

Abstract

When most people hear the words community service, they tend to think of "privileged" individuals going out and serving the "less privileged". Many people in society today think that only wealthy people need to perform community service as a way to deepen their sense of social responsibility (Bojar, 1989). Society needs to realize that community service participation can be of great value to everyone, not just the wealthy. The words "public" and "duty" are often considered synonyms for the terms "community" and "service", respectively. In other words, one could say that it is the "public's duty" to help one another. Race, ethnic background, and socio-economic status do not affect one's ability to participate in community service programs. Community service is an act of citizenship and every American is responsible for serving his or her community in some way (Barber & Battistoni, 1993). Basically, community service participation should be viewed as one's civic responsibility, not as an act of charity.

COMMUNITY SERVICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Heidi Jean Patterson

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When most people hear the words community service, they tend to think of “privileged” individuals going out and serving the “less privileged”. Many people in society today think that only wealthy people need to perform community service as a way to deepen their sense of social responsibility (Bojar, 1989). Society needs to realize that community service participation can be of great value to everyone, not just the wealthy. The words “public” and “duty” are often considered synonyms for the terms “community” and “service”, respectively. In other words, one could say that it is the “public’s duty” to help one another. Race, ethnic background, and socio-economic status do not affect one’s ability to participate in community service programs. Community service is an act of citizenship and every American is responsible for serving his or her community in some way (Barber & Battistoni, 1993). Basically, community service participation should be viewed as one’s civic responsibility, not as an act of charity.

During the 1980s, there appeared to be a steady decline in the quality of life among American adolescents and young adults. These young people seemed to have very little interest in societal affairs and in the welfare of others (Serow, Ciechalski, & Daye, 1990). Even though there has been a slight increase in community service participation in the

1990s, the current generation of college students are still viewed as being too concerned with material wealth and private pleasure (Serow, 1991). They are considered greedy, with little concern for others. The main reason today's college students give for going to college is to improve their chances for financial success (Rubin, 1990). They are not concerned about developing a personal philosophy on life. There appears to be an absence of values such as helpfulness and commitment to the common good in young people today (Rubin, 1990). Many people believe that encouraging participation in community service is a way to challenge this generation of students to become active and involved citizens.

Since the goal of most academic institutions is to educate the "whole" student, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on student involvement. Thus, community service participation is a growing issue on many college campuses across the nation. Previous studies indicate that students who are actively involved during school experience greater growth and achievement and express more satisfaction with their overall education. These students are also more likely to stay in college and to complete their education (Fitch, 1991). Community service programs also

teach students communication skills and give them the opportunity to learn how to work with others.

Even though the advantages to community service participation outnumber the disadvantages, some people still express concern. Since the majority of college students have to work at least part time in order to pay for college, many people feel that students do not have the time to volunteer for community service. Thus, a number of schools are discussing the idea of giving academic credit to students who volunteer their time. While some students like the idea, others think it is unfair.

The aforementioned are topics discussed in this paper. The purpose of the paper is to outline the advantages and disadvantages of community service participation by college students and to discuss the motivations and characteristics of those students who choose to volunteer. The paper will also describe selected established programs and recommendations will be made for establishing successful campus-based community service programs.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

Institutions of higher education were established in the United States with the purpose of enabling students to render service to society. Harvard, founded in 1636, was established to train schoolmasters, the “divines”, and statesmen, to distinguish the difference between civilization and barbarism (Wieckowski, 1992). By the 1890s, Harvard was promoting the idea that both students and society could benefit by gaining practical experience outside of the classroom. Most academic institutions today promote the same idea by encouraging students to participate in extra-curricular activities. These activities, which range anywhere from athletics to community service participation, encourage active learning through real-life situations and greatly enhance the academic experience.

Service learning programs add an important dimension to a student’s education. They help students grow both educationally and morally. Education is a function of both books and experiences, and in order to learn, one must connect what one reads with what one does or observes. When community service programs are used as a supplement to the traditional classroom, students learn to develop their skill, insight,

and commitment. Service learning programs foster intellectual and emotional development with challenges and lessons from real-life, that are often powerful and convincing. Thus, students learn from what they see and experience.

Community service programs also enable students to learn about different cultures and become familiar with society's needs. By working in different environments and with people from different cultures, students are often confronted with values and ideas that are different than their own. Thus, they learn how to work with others who have different needs and abilities. Community service participation gives college students time to work out their personal philosophies in life and decide how they fit into society (Gwynne, 1989). It helps students gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the importance of their role in society. Many students realize that they have a individual obligation to society and start to see themselves as active members of their community. Thus, students begin to take pride in their accomplishments and in their community.

Community service participation is also beneficial to students as individuals. As students help others, they become aware of their own self worth and begin to gain confidence, courage, and self-reliance. Community service programs give students the opportunity to develop

social skills that are necessary to work with others. By working with other people, students learn skills in leadership, collaboration, planning, negotiating, and evaluating (Wutzdorff, 1993). They are also given the opportunity to practice decision-making and problem-solving skills (Baird, 1982). These skills enhance the students' career opportunities and make them more marketable in the employment field. Thus, community service programs prepare students for meaningful and productive lives, both personally and professionally (Wutzdorff, 1993).

Disadvantages

There are also disadvantages to students participating in community service activities. Two of the biggest disadvantages are time and money. Some students spread themselves so thin with extra-curricular activities that they neglect and ignore their studies. Community service participation may serve as another distraction for these students. Other students simply cannot afford to "volunteer" their time. Today, the majority of college students have to work at least part time in order to pay for college and live on their own. In a recent survey sent to 102 colleges and universities, 70 percent of the student respondents cited financial deterrents as the main reason for not participating in community service activities (Gwynn, 1989). In the same survey, 43 percent of the

respondents also cited the lack of academic credit as a deterrent (Gwynn, 1989). Unless students receive academic credit or some other tangible reward for volunteering, many will choose not to volunteer because the expense of volunteering outweighs the benefits.

Another important topic is the controversy among colleges and universities over whether community service participation should be voluntary or mandatory. Some colleges are beginning to require community service participation as part of the curriculum and for graduation. Many people debate whether or not this is beneficial to students. Some people argue that requiring students to perform community service will take away the “spirit” of serving. Most people volunteer to help others because they enjoy doing it. By requiring students to serve, they may begin to resent the work and the people they are helping. Students may begin to view community service as something negative, rather than as a positive. On the other hand, many students are unaware of the community service opportunities in their communities. By requiring them to serve, they will have the opportunity to explore these opportunities, and some may even continue to serve voluntarily after they get started (Bok & Newman, 1992).

Some people also argue that community service programs hurt the people in which they serve. They insist that service programs teach people that others will take care of them and that they do not need to help themselves. In other words, serving the less fortunate hinders their ability to survive (McKnight, 1989). Some people believe that service programs build on people's deficiencies rather than on their strengths. Instead of taking care of people and doing things for them, we need to focus on showing people how to take care of themselves and build on their strengths. We need to show people how to work together to build communities.

Motivations and Characteristics of Volunteers

Motivations

In the past, volunteer involvement in community service has been an important and well-known aspect of American life. Thus, it is vital that today's college students learn the importance of serving their community and the impact that it has on the future of our society. Student affairs professionals are often responsible for establishing campus-based community service programs and for recruiting and promoting student volunteers. However, in order to recruit and promote student volunteers, one must know what motivates students to volunteer. Previous studies

indicate that motivations for volunteering may be divided into three categories. A person may volunteer for altruistic reasons, with the goal of helping others; one may volunteer for egotistical reasons, with the goal of increasing his/her own welfare; or one may volunteer because he/she feels a social obligation to society (Fitch, 1987).

In 1991, a multi-method study was conducted to find out what motivates college students to volunteer. The first part of the study consisted of a 51-item survey that was administered to 759 students from four public universities in the south and midwest United States. Two hundred and sixty of the respondents identified themselves as community service participants (CSP) (Serow, 1991). The second part of the study consisted of a brief interview to obtain more detailed information. Unfortunately, only 42 students agreed to be interviewed. These 42 students considered community service participation to be an important aspect of their lives and vital to their overall development. The results of the survey portion showed that 80 percent of the CSPs stated that the satisfaction they gained from helping others was their primary motivation for volunteering (Serow, 1991). In other words, their motives were altruistic in nature. However, 54 percent also stated that they felt a social obligation and that they had a duty to correct societal problems (Serow,

1991). The majority of the 42 students interviewed also stated that volunteering was beneficial to themselves (Serow, 1991). Students who volunteer for egotistical reasons often do so to improve their chances for success later in life. Many students volunteer to gain skills and valuable work experience that is not easily attainable otherwise. Some students also volunteer to make up for missed opportunities or lost relationships (Serow, 1991). Most students do not volunteer to gain prestige or to explore careers, or because it is required for school or by their religion. Most students who volunteer are internally motivated (Fitch, 1987). Regardless of the reasons why students volunteer, whether they be altruistic or egotistical, studies show that the benefits to volunteering must exceed the costs in order for students to continue to volunteer.

Characteristics

Student affairs professionals must also be familiar with the different characteristics that separate college students who volunteer from those who do not. In 1986, a community service involvement survey was distributed to 76 students enrolled at a major southeastern university. The students in the sample were all involved in organizations whose primary function was to provide service to the community. The results of the survey showed that 89 percent of the respondents had been involved

in community service programs before coming to college (Fitch, 1987). Seventy-eight percent of the respondents also stated that their parents were involved in community service programs. Forty percent of the students stated that their friends were the most influential when deciding to volunteer, followed by their parents at 33 percent (Fitch, 1987). These results show that positive role models play a significant role in the development of altruistic concern and volunteerism (Fitch, 1987).

Another survey was done using the Survey of Interpersonal Values (SIV). This survey was given to a random sample of 285 college students. The results showed that women, highly religious students, and students who live in the residence halls are more involved in service-oriented activities (Fitch, 1991). The survey also showed that students involved in service activities tend to be more concerned about conforming to regulations and doing what is socially correct. They also value helping the less fortunate, doing things for others, and working with others. Students who do not participate in community service activities tend to do things on their own, make their own decisions, and are extremely independent (Fitch, 1991).

Community Service Programs

Establishment

Service learning programs benefit the students, the community, and the college in a variety of ways. These programs combine the traditional educational goals of intellectual and personal growth, with the social values of community service. Campus-based community service programs help establish a link between the academic community and the general public. Even though it takes a lot of time and effort to establish a campus-based service learning program, once established, the rewards are abundant.

When establishing a service learning program, one must keep in mind that each college is responsible for setting up a program that will benefit and satisfy the needs of it's students, community, and institution. In order to create a successful service learning program, the academic institution must first make ten crucial decisions (Barber & Battistoni, 1993). The first decision is whether the community service program should be education based or extra-curricular. Some schools treat community service as a practicum experience that is essential to complete the classroom learning experience. Other institutions, however, simply treat it as an extra-curricular activity. The second decision is parallel to

the first one. The institution must decide whether the community service is mandatory or voluntary. Some schools require community service participation as part of the curriculum. Mandatory service, however, often causes a great deal of controversy because people believe that you shouldn't force students to help others in that manner. An academic institution should not make service mandatory until it can provide a variety of courses and service programs that cover the majority of students' interests. The third choice is whether community service is civic or philanthropic. The civic approach encourages an educational partnership between colleges and their communities, and focuses on educational responsibility. The philanthropic approach emphasizes service as an act of charity (Barber & Battistoni, 1993). In this view, the more advantaged feel obligated to help the less privileged. The fourth decision is whether or not to offer academic credit for community service activities. If a college chooses to give credit, a pass/fail grade should be given for the community service experience outside of the classroom. Next is the issue of offering a single service course or multiple courses. Larger institutions should offer a number of different courses that reflect the different needs and concerns of the various departments. However, all of the courses should contain a central core related to democratic community and

citizenship (Barber & Battistoni, 1993). The next issue is whether to view the community as a partner or as a client. In most cases, the community and school form a partnership and work together to educate the students. The seventh issue is whether the students should serve in groups or individually. Most schools prefer to have the students work together so they can learn the concepts of team work and cooperation. The eighth issue is whether or not faculty should be required to serve. Even though academic institutions can require students to do many things, they cannot always require the same of faculty members (Barber & Battistoni, 1993). Some people say that institutions must also decide if their goal is to develop responsible and effective citizens or develop the students critical thinking skills. Actually, community service participation accomplishes both of these tasks. The last choice is to decide who is involved in the planning and implementation of the service learning program. In order to create a successful program, it is vital that students are involved 100 percent in the planning process along with the academic administrators and the community. By establishing strong, successful community service programs, education, citizenship, and service can be linked together to build a strong community.

Programs

There are a number of excellent community service programs based on college campuses throughout the United States. Several of these programs may serve as excellent models to help schools establish programs of their own. One of the best known community service organizations is called Campus Compact. Campus Compact was established in 1985 by the presidents of Brown, Georgetown, and Stanford Universities in an attempt to change the academic agenda and encourage educators to undertake both the intellectual and moral training of America's youth (Theus, 1988). The organization's objective was to encourage campuses to promote community service opportunities for students and make them aware of their obligation to society. They wanted to help college students create a better world through community service (Diffily, 1989). The strategy they used was to create an environment that included volunteer activity as an integral part of one's collegiate experience. The Campus Compact organization, along with their parent organization, Education Commission of the States (ECS), believe that today's undergraduate experience needs a public service component and that a college education should include the teaching of civic responsibility (Diffily, 1989). They also believe that college

graduates should leave the institution with a lifelong commitment to service (Diffily, 1989). Campus Compact tries to remind society that academic institutions prepare students for their lives as citizens as well as for their careers.

In 1973, the city of Atlanta established a program called the Community of Believers (Crim, 1988). This organization began as a result of town meetings called to encourage open communication between the school systems and the community. In 1981, this program grew into the Atlanta Partnership of Business and Higher Education, Inc. The organization works to tie together the resources of business, higher education, government, religious groups, and human service agencies for the benefit of youth (Crim, 1988). Since this program was established, programs such as the Atlanta Adopt-A-Student Program, the Youth Development and Creative Leadership Program, Project Success, and the Magnolia Club, have been started in order to help students in a variety of areas such as illiteracy and drug abuse. These organizations also encourage minorities and less privileged students to go to college by offering scholarships and other types of financial and moral support.

Youth Educational Services (Y.E.S.), started in 1968 at Humboldt State University, is an excellent example of a student-initiated community

service program. Started as a single tutoring project, by 1982, Y.E.S. was composed of 17 different programs all initiated and directed by students. The funding for these programs came primarily from student activity fees. The fact that Y.E.S. programs are student initiated and directed is what differentiates them from other service-learning programs. A large number of programs simply place students who volunteer into existing projects or programs. Y.E.S. gives students the opportunity to create their own projects and express their own ideas (Hardin, 1982). Students involved in the Y.E.S. program are completely involved in the decision-making, planning, and implementation of the social action.

As one can see, a variety of successful programs and organizations have been established to try and benefit America's youth. Unfortunately, more programs are needed. In order to establish successful youth programs, there must be an interdependent relationship between the school systems and the community. They must work together and combine resources in order to reach as many young people as possible, and improve the future of our society.

Conclusion

Several factors have contributed to the growth of service learning over the last few of years. One minor factor is the new concern for career

preparation. Another factor is the failure of traditional methods of preparing young people for the transition from school to work and adulthood. Most importantly, however, is the realization of how much students can contribute to a society that is in short supply of funds and volunteers. There is a growing awareness that the value of serving others is relevant for people of all ages. Ideally, one should try to balance the growth of one's self with their concern for others. Besides simply learning how to earn a living, education should teach students to find satisfaction in other aspects of their lives. Community service participation can help students see the importance that service has on society.

I believe that student affairs professionals play an important role in encouraging students to participate in community service activities. Promoting community service projects in the residence halls, sororities, fraternities, and other campus organizations is an excellent way to expose college students to a life of service. Professors can also promote service by offering extra credit in their classes for a set number of hours of service during the semester. I believe this would encourage students who live off campus to get involved. Student affairs professionals should encourage students to volunteer for service activities both in groups and

as individuals. There are plenty of jobs to fit the needs and desires of many people.

I strongly believe that college students (and even high school students) should be encouraged to participate in community service activities. The earlier that students start volunteering, the stronger their commitment to service will become. Academic institutions are an ideal place to demonstrate the positive aspects of serving. The goal of academic institutions is to prepare students for life in the "real world". By teaching students at an early age that serving the community and helping others is one of their responsibilities in life, they will grow up with a strong commitment to service. I believe it is the responsibility of parents, academic institutions, and society, to teach America's youth the importance of service and helping others.

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