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## The Impact of a Service-Learning Project on Undergraduate Students' Faith Development and Spiritual Formation: Outcomes of an Organization and Administrative Behavior Course

**Roxanne Helm-Stevens \***

Azusa Pacific University, USA

**Dan Kipley**

Azusa Pacific University, USA

**Todd Pheifer**

Azusa Pacific University, USA

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**Abstract:** Spiritual growth and development is frequently cited as an outcome of participation in service-learning projects. However, little research has focused on measuring the students' ability to understand the connection between the service-learning experience and their personal faith and the ability to live out their Christian values in the field. Notably missing from this particularly limited area of study is the Christian values convergence of being able to understand the worth of all people and a desire to be engaged in serving the community. Encompassing both quantitative and qualitative research methods, this study investigates undergraduate business students' perceptions of the impact of a semester-long urban service-learning project on their spiritual lives and faith formation. Specific attention is given to exploring the students' perception of faith as demarcated by the Christian praxis of the students' relationship with God and with others.

**Keywords:** *Service-learning, faith development, spiritual formation.*

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### Introduction

Often confused with community service and civic engagement, service-learning has been broadly defined as "an approach to teaching and learning that involves having students perform community service as a means for achieving academic goals" (Biling & Furco, 2002, p.7). Lamson, Ballard, and LaClaire (2006) further defined service-learning as "an approach that combines in-class material with volunteer-like service within the community, allowing students to learn the course information and apply it to real-life situations" (p. 186).

To further differentiate community service and civic engagement from service-learning, Howard explained that "academic service learning is not merely the addition of a community service option or requirement to an academic course" or "a clause on a syllabus that directs students to complete community service hours" (1998, p. 19), clarifying that service-learning focuses equal attention on learning, service, and reflection. In 2012, Budhai (p.17) noted that numerous scholars have defined "service-learning as the combination and/or integration of participation in a community service activity with formal learning and/or reflection (Biling & Furco, 2002; Clark, 1999; Helm-Stevens & Griego, 2009; Lamson, Ballard, & LaClaire, 2006; Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006; Tucker, McCarthy, & Lenk, 1998; Yan & Rodgers, 2006)."

Today, service learning has developed into a common aspect of the college experience (Ngai, 2006), with programs that span from first-year orientation through graduation. While popularity has grown on college campuses, service learning as a measurable event can lack a common definition due to the diversity of activities and outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1994). Despite the definitional difficulty, Eyler & Giles (1999) suggest an operational description of service learning, which has provided ongoing guidance in higher education circles. This definition proposes that service learning is "a cycle of action and reflection" where students "link personal and social development with academic and cognitive development." The suggestion is that service learning has the potential to enhance learning outcomes from the classroom and lead to more effective application in the future. In a faith-based setting, there may be an institutional assumption (Otto & Harrington, 2016) that service-learning and other ministry-oriented programs will organically lead to faith development, a deeper relationship with God, and a sense of civic engagement that stems from an understand

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**\*Corresponding Author:**

Roxanne Helm-Stevens, DBA, Azusa Pacific University, School of Business and Management, California, USA.

E-mail: [rhelmstevens@apu.edu](mailto:rhelmstevens@apu.edu)

that all people have spiritual worth. The challenge is that there is a lack of research suggesting that faith development and a more specific connection to a higher power is an inherent and measurable outcome of service learning activities.

#### *The Development of Compassion*

While personal growth and the development of critical thinking skills (Campbell & Oswald, 2018) may develop through the action of service learning, the individual experience may vary depending on the student and the specifics of the activity. Academic understanding and awareness of specified subject matter may occur, or students can have opportunities to apply theory (Ricke, 2018). In addition, there may be expectations that service-learning activities can result in a shift in attitude towards people groups, environments, and general society. Due to these expectations, educational leaders may seek to facilitate certain outcomes in the design process of service learning opportunities, which include compassion, curiosity, and capacity building, among others (McKinnon & Feely, 2011). A key factor in service learning is the implied possibility of value development as a result of participating, and the desire to explore further opportunities of service. A study of a community-based immersion trip found that participants expressed an increased level of empathy (Plante, et al., 2009). In addition, Astin et al. (2000) suggests that service learning has positive effects on values such as commitment to activism and promotion of racial understanding, while Reed-Bouley (2012) indicates that service learning may serve as a conduit for antiracism education. Other studies suggest that participants in service-learning activities are more likely to examine their sense of social responsibility (Reed et al., 2005; Younghee et al., 2017). These results imply that service learning not only promotes cognitive awareness, but also leads to a shift in personal viewpoints.

#### *Civic Engagement and a Desire to Serve the Community*

The connection between compassion and future behaviors could be described as putting beliefs into action. One study of young adults found a connection between service learning and a sense of agency, systems worldview, and certain types of civic engagement (Moore, et al., 2016). This suggests that people knowingly express their personal principles and experience faith or spiritual development through community activity. Related to this is the work of Parks (2000), who proposes that faith development is a process of meaning making, which connects to an individual desire for action that may result in social change. Feenstra (2001) argues that service-learning activities may lead to a more defined sense of vocation, which is a key focal point in higher education. The key difference between vocation and employment is that vocation may have broader considerations of societal betterment rather than simply seeking work that sustains a person economically. As noted by Levisohn (2012), a primary purpose of service learning is to “effect some change in the world.”

In a faith-based institution of higher learning, the concept of vocation is often tied to an attitude of lifelong service to a higher power (Roels, 2017). Because there is a link between vocation and faith-development, faith-based institutions have developed specific service learning opportunities as an expression of core institutional principles.

#### *Deepening Relationship with God or Engagement with Spirituality*

To examine the link between service learning and worldview, it is necessary to examine the development of personal ideology. This brings us to the question of faith development, and whether service learning in a faith-based setting leads to a deeper relationship with God. While evangelical institutions may place an emphasis on a Judeo-Christian understanding of God, it is important to note the work of Love (2001), who argues that members of society may differentiate between the religion and spirituality. The implication for service learning is that individuals may reflect on their activity in spiritual terms, but not specifically attach their experience to a defined religion or particular higher power. However, as noted, in a faith-based setting that is founded on or follows a particular worldview, there may be a stated desire for students to have intimate knowledge of, or a personal connection to, a specific higher power. As noted by Bowman & Small (2010), the religious affiliation of the institution plays a key role in the spiritual development of the individual, which may be manifested through classroom learning and out-of-class events. This implies that student activities provided by the institution may be the conduit for this faith development.

#### *Faith Development and Spiritual Formation*

As noted, a key challenge to any discussion of faith or spiritual development is operational definitions (Gay, 2000; Gunnlaugson & Vokey, 2014). Belief in a higher power is not universal, and individual beliefs may be broadly described as worldview, ideology, or other language-based terminology. Despite this definitional challenge, there remains an interest in studying the factors that may contribute to faith development and how that belief is manifested through lifestyle and action. Wallace (2017) argues that for students to experience a level of growth in their spiritual identity, they must undergo experiences that disrupt their normal patterns of thinking. In other words, they must be challenged to examine the validity of their prior attitudes and perspectives. Because service-learning activities are often designed to put students in unfamiliar or challenging environments, there exists the possibility of pattern disruption. Here again we can cite the work of Campbell & Oswald (2018), who suggest that critical thinking is developed through a process of cognitive dissonance, where the student is tested through the exposure to service learning activities.

*Spiritual Engagement*

Because the definitions of spirituality remain broad-based, the challenge is to connect activities with outcomes and examine whether these events may lead to a more defined connection to a higher power. Despite these definitional challenges, Sikula & Sikula (2005) suggest that there may be a relationship between spirit development and a focus on serving others through service learning activities. More specifically, Firmin et. al. (2015) found that “students reported deepening their appreciation for the grace of God in their lives” through an urban ministries program. The caveat to a service learning connection is that this appreciation may have been a result of the program being more immersive in nature, rather than traditional activities that are more often short-term in nature. This leads us back to the original purpose of this study, which is to examine links between service-learning activities, and a deeper relationship with God.

*Project Description*

This study surveyed undergraduate business students attending a private, faith-based university in California. Specifically, the study population was comprised of students enrolled in a required 400 level organizational and administrative behavior business course during the Fall 2016, Spring 2017, and Fall 2017 semesters.

Participating in a six-week service-learning project, students taught in continuation education high schools located in underserved areas throughout Los Angeles, CA. In groups, students were assigned to classrooms for six consecutive weeks upon completion of an on-site orientation.

Students were responsible for teaching the Options: Life Skills & Business Education for Urban Youth curriculum once a week for one hour. Designed to be interactive, the curriculum focuses on education and provides opportunities for role modeling and mentoring through the use of discussion activities. Group assignments and high-school class assignments remained constant for the duration of the project.

*Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*

This study explored the experiences of undergraduate students participating in a service-learning project using a mixed methods approach. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) report that blending quantitative and qualitative data collection methods can enhance a study that is suitable to both models.

Researchers designed this study combining quantitative and qualitative research methodology to gain a more complete understanding of the students’ perceptions. Robbins (2001) claimed that “rigorous qualitative research can provide the ‘why’ behind statistically significant differences” (p. 27).

*Data Collection*

This mixed methods study utilized Google Forms to distribute the survey instrument. The survey consisted of 11 questions; seven closed-ended (using a Likert scale 1 – 4), three open-ended, and one question to provide for respondent’s comments. The survey was designed to maintain participants’ anonymity, since no individual data was collected. Participants received a pledge of confidentiality with an explanation of their rights upon launch of the online survey.

The total population response rate of 73.4% is comprised of Fall 2016 (62 students), Spring 2017 (43 students), and Fall 2017 (68 students). The survey instrument remained constant throughout the three semesters.

*Assumptions*

First, investigators presumed the research study model and statistical analysis were appropriate for the study. Additionally, the researchers believed and accepted that the respondents would be able to understand the survey questions and answer them honestly.

**Findings**

This section will present three different empirical dimensions of findings. The first dimension presents the basic demographic characteristics of respondents. The second dimension, List 1, illustrates quantitative questions 1-7 and their respective means. List 2 presents the qualified response results of open-ended questions 8-10. Finally, because qualitative research is often utilized as a deeper form of inquiry and analysis, the discussion of findings section will focus on an examination of the reflections and opinions found in questions 8-10.

*Demographics*

Participants in this study were from Azusa Pacific University (APU), a private Christian college located 26 miles northeast of Los Angeles. Built on a tradition of Wesleyan Holiness, Azusa Pacific University’s undergraduate student population represents diverse Christian backgrounds. The university incorporates Christian religious beliefs into the undergraduate experience through chapel, discipleship groups, and mission trips.

As a basic demographic description, the participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an organizational behavior class. The participant's class standing ranged from sophomore (student athletes and other priority registration categories) to juniors and seniors.

The research questionnaire gathered descriptive information on gender, class standing, and major. From a total of 118 gender responses, more than half of the respondents were male. Our sample is comprised of male student (n=63) and female student (n=55) respondents. A majority of the population, 96.64%, reported being upperclassmen. Of the 119 class standing responses, 78.99% selected Senior (n=94) while 17.65% selected Junior (n=21).

At the time of the study, business management majors represented the largest section of the population, 58.24% (n=53). Marketing majors accounted for 10.99% (n=10), while accounting and finance majors represented 13.19% (n=12) and 8.79% (n=8) respectively. Finally, business economic 2.20% (n=2), international business 2.20% (n=2), and entrepreneurship 1.10 (n=1) majors accounted for 5.4% of the population. There were no incentives for completing the survey instrument or participating in this research.

*Descriptive Statistics*

**List 1. Quantitative Questions and Means**

Q1. I feel that I made a positive contribution at my service site.  
M = 3.698, SD = 0.47

Q2. My understanding of Organizational Behavior was enhanced by the service-learning project.  
M = 3.365, SD = 0.76

Q3. I was able to make connections between course content and service-learning experiences through classroom reflection time/assignments.  
M = 3.277, SD = 0.76

Q4. This service-learning experience helped me better understand the value of all people.  
M = 3.650, SD = 0.52

Q5. My desire to be involved in the community in the future has increased through this experience.  
M = 3.468, SD = 0.65

Q6. This service-learning experience provided me with the opportunity to live out Christian values.  
M = 3.539, SD = 0.61

Q7. I am able to understand the connection between my service-learning experience & my personal faith.  
M = 3.547, SD = 0.62

*Table 1. Q1 – Q7 Bivariate Correlation Table*

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
Q1	1						
Q2	0.257	1					
Q3	0.319	0.553	1				
Q4	0.169	0.342	0.210	1			
Q5	0.197	0.345	0.323	0.539	1		
Q6	0.188	0.310	0.333	0.511	0.481	1	
Q7	0.175	0.362	0.366	0.584	0.583	0.625	1

Using Excel, a bivariate Pearson Correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship(s) between the Q1 – Q7 variables. Expressing the strength of a relationship between two variables by using a single value between +1 and -1, the correlation coefficient indicates the statistical relationships between variables. Represented by Pearson's r, the correlation below expresses the strength of linkage or co-occurrence between to variables.

As delineated in Table 1: Bivariate Correlation Table, multiple small, weak relationships were established. Interestingly, the bivariate Pearson Correlations also determined significantly strong positive correlations between several variables. Q4 (This service-learning experience helped me better understand the value of all people) had large, strong positive correlations with Q5 (My desire to be involved in the community in the future has increased through this experience)  $r = +.54$ , Q6 (This service-learning experience provided me with the opportunity to live out Christian values)  $r = +.51$ , and Q7 (I am able to understand the connection between my service-learning experience & my personal faith)  $r = +.58$ . From these variables, a large, strong positive

relationship was also found between Q5 and Q7,  $r = +.58$ . The largest, strongest positive relationship was found between Q6 and Q7,  $r = +.62$ .

Overall, the bivariate Pearson Correlation revealed the strongest positive relationships between Q4 and Q7 ( $r = +.58$ ), Q5 and Q7 ( $r = +.58$ ), and Q6 and Q7 ( $r = +.62$ ).

## List 2. Qualitative Questions and Percentages

Q8. Academic: How was your learning supported by the service-learning project and/or the people you interacted with?

32.5% – responded that the project improved group/teamwork and understanding

28.2% – responded that they were able to effectively apply course material to the project

Q9. Reciprocal: In what ways was your service beneficial to you and/or those you served? (feel free to give a specific example)

20.5% – felt like they were contributing to the community

23.9% – felt like the project was beneficial in improving skills and gaining real-life experience

Q10. Making a Difference: How did this project encourage you to be a difference maker?

38.46% – felt that they could see that they were making difference by their involvement in the community

## Discussion of Findings

The mixed methods design was effective in gaining insight into the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students. The qualitative data (reported verbatim) gave meaning to the quantitative data and provided insights to student perceptions. Likewise, the quantitative analysis confirms conclusions from the qualitative data.

### *Academic*

Academic responses suggested the service-learning project enhanced learning outcomes from the classroom, 32.5% responded that the project improved group/teamwork and understanding and 28.2% responded that they were able to effectively apply course material to the project. Students noted the ability to apply concepts and theories from the class in their projects, “We were able to apply theories learned in class and see how they play out in classroom settings.” Additional, typical student replies included, “My learning was supported by the project because in working with my own group and the school, I could see theories in real life. I could also apply some learned theories to enhance my time at Coronado” and “This project allowed us to practically apply what we learned about working in group. We learned about various goal-setting and time management theories that applied regularly throughout the project.” A review and analysis of qualitative student responses substantiates Q2: My understanding of Organizational Behavior was enhanced by the service-learning project ( $M = 3.365$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ).

### *Reciprocal*

Open-ended responses to the Reciprocal question illustrated students’ understanding of the mutual benefits of service-learning. Examples of student replies included “My service was beneficial in that, not only was I able to impact the students, but they had a significant impact on me. Hearing their stories truly moved me” and “I felt like I most benefited from this experience. I learned how to be more diverse in communication methods and adapt to an environment that is different than my own.” The student comment, “I think we received much more than what we gave” summarized the spirit of many longer replies.

In addition to their classroom teaching experience, student responses revealed an ability to identify learning that occurred through their group experience. “It was both a learning experience for myself and the students/work group as I was able to gain new perspectives on how others see, learn, and perceive things. Being in the classroom allowed me to experience a sense of diversity both within the classroom and my service learning group.”

Student responses also revealed a deeper understanding of the Options curriculum role modeling and mentoring goals, “The project let us give back to the students where we served. We became role models for the students to follow. We got to make a difference in others (sic) lives” and “My service was beneficial to me because I found a passion for at-risk teenagers and I would like to make it part of my life to devote time and resources to helping them in the future. I also enjoyed hearing about their plans for the future. It was refreshing to see them set goals and make progress towards their future education and careers in each activity that we did with them.”

### *Difference Makers*

Under the Making a Difference question, 38.46% of respondents felt they were making difference through their involvement in the community. An analysis of the open-ended responses included expected student responses, such as “It encouraged me to help others more” and “It inspires me to want to help people.” In addition, students declared past

intentions and future aspirations, such as “I have always known I wanted to serve communities in my future, but this allowed me the opportunity to work with high school students” and “This project was encouraging which makes me want to continue to strive to make a difference.” Reflections on future aspirations support Q5: My desire to be involved in the community in the future has increased through this experience ( $M = 3.468$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ).

However, responses also revealed that students experienced a change in perceptions, “I entered the school with judgments on how the students would behave, but they are really good students who just need some care” and “It taught me not to judge someone, before I know them. To reach out to those in need/marginalized because they are reachable and we can definitely continue to make an impact.” Qualitative responses support (M= 3.650, SD = 0.52) found in Q4: This service-learning experience helped me better understand the value of all people.

Finally, student replies included strong spiritual formation and faith development themes supporting Q6: This service-learning experience provided me with the opportunity to live out Christian values ( $M = 3.539$ ,  $SD = 0.61$  and Q7: I am able to understand the connection between my service-learning experience & my personal faith ( $M = 3.547$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ). Offering insight, examples of student responses included, “Seeing God work in me, but also how I was able to have an impact on others by giving back to the community” and “Service is an important aspect of faith, and so any opportunity to serve is an opportunity to strengthen my own faith. Some of the kids were sad to see us go; so it was a blessing to see the impact we made.”

Several of the responses were aspirational, for example “I want to help the youth of the next generation to be Christ Followers and learn to love one another. One of the greatest things I can do is serve with love and with that I can accomplish a ton” and “Working with the students was very rewarding and makes me want to keep making a difference in high schoolers lives.”

In addition to the future-orientation, many of the responses included a theme of compassion for those served. For example, “It reminded me that there are people that are struggling more than me and that by being there I can really impact lives. Also, that I do have enough free time to at least pick up another activity where I can volunteer and help out the community.”

#### *Additional Comments*

Finally, there were several students that commented under Additional Comments. Surprisingly, students were motivated to further comment on their service-learning experience. Reflecting further on the Academic and Reciprocal themes, sample comments include, “This project was a lot more impactful than I thought it would be. I will miss our classroom of kids and learning more about them and myself” and “This service-learning experience has been extremely beneficial for my entire team and the students. Being able to encourage students who do not receive that at home has been a huge blessing.” Certainly, this study found that respondents felt they made a positive contribution at their service learning project (Q1,  $M = 3.698$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ). This supports previous findings by Park, Helm, Kipley & Hancock (2009) that sharing and exhibiting one's beliefs in a service-learning environment improves the perceived effectiveness of that project.

Lastly, perhaps because university business classes do not typically embed service-learning projects in their curriculum, several students commented on their overall experience. Students described their experience as “This experience was truly eye-opening and unlike anything I've experienced before” and “Great class! The experience in the classroom was an amazing way to learn.” “Overall, a great learning experience that I will remember for years.”

#### *Application for Varied Populations*

While this study focused on a more specific group of students, it should be noted that the results have implications for broader populations in higher education and other environments. Outcomes such as civic engagement and a desire to serve the community are not the exclusive purview of particular faith-based groups, which expands the potential application of this study to other learners. While Q6 and Q7 do address more specific areas of Christian values, Q1 through Q5 can be applied more generally to populations that do not specifically express a Judeo-Christian worldview.

Saroglou (2010) suggests that the religiousness of an individual is expressed through the personality traits of agreeableness and conscientiousness. Given that service-learning activities represent a chance to put personal ideology into action, participants have the opportunity to conscientiously pursue myriad developmental outcomes and personal growth. These outcomes may include the construct of agreeableness, but can also encompass other aspects discussed in the literature review, such as compassion, racial understanding, and social responsibility.

#### *Limitations*

Identification of potential limitations include demographics of population and survey instrumentation design. First, this study gathered data from a single faith-based university. The university undergraduate applications outline the spiritual environment requirements to prospective students, including Biblical, Theological, and Philosophical Formation requirements. The respondents in this study would have been exposed to the spiritual environment requirements. Responses and findings may differ in a secular university setting.

Second, the survey tool was constructed with all quantitative questions having the same Likert scale formatting style. Typically constructed with a five or seven-point scale, the four-point scale captures less data yet it eliminates the neutral answer. An ordinal psychometric measurement of beliefs and opinions, the Likert Scale is advantageous in that it is easily understood by respondents. Moreover, Likert Scale responses produce an efficient and inexpensive method for collecting and coding data. However, a possible disadvantage to the Likert Scale is the possibility of the respondents' previous answers to influence future questions. Quantitative questions were constructed with a consistently sequenced 1-4 scale, which could have produced an answering trend by respondents.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Bowman and Small (2010) noted that religious affiliation of the institution plays a key role in the spiritual development of the individual, which may be manifested through classroom learning and out-of-class events. Research conducted by Park, Helm, Kipley & Hancock (2009) found a positive correlation between Christian university "students' ability to act as "salt and light", to exhibit the ideals of their faith through action, and having a feeling of usefulness during the service-learning project" (2009, p. 67). Recently, a study by Dickerson, Helm-Stevens, and Fall supported the notion of spiritual development through service-learning projects. Specifically, their study found that "87% percent of students viewed their service learning as a form of ministry" (2017, p. 5).

This study implies that carefully crafted service-learning projects in a Christian University setting may be a conduit for spiritual formation and provide the platform for 'serving God by serving others'. Yet, caution should be taken in interpreting the data contained within this study. Because this study had a limited faith-based focus, a number of analyses remain for future studies.

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