

Linking Service Learning and Civic Engagement in Community College Students

BY MARY PRENTICE AND GAIL ROBINSON

The use of service learning in community colleges has increased as research continues to link participation in service learning with a growing list of student benefits. One possible benefit of service learning participation is the fostering of greater civic awareness and commitment in students.

In 2003 the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) received a three-year grant from the Learn and Serve America program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. The purpose of the *Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning* grant was to create and enhance service learning activities at eight community colleges selected in a national competition. The proposed end outcome for this grant was to increase civic knowledge and civic commitment in at least 50 percent of the service learning students from these eight *Horizons* grantee colleges.

AACC defines service learning as combining community service with academic instruction, focusing on critical, reflective thinking and personal and civic responsibility. Civic engagement—knowledge and commitment combined—means active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good.

The research on service learning's influence on civic engagement development has seen mixed outcomes. Much of the research has found that when civic commitment is defined as political behavior (e.g., working for a political campaign), service learning does not seem to have an influence (Battistoni 1997; Walker 2000). If the definition of civic engagement is expanded to include both political and community involvement, however, the influence of service learning begins to appear (Hunter and Brisbin 2000).

Students who have taken one or more courses with service learning appear to be more knowledgeable about and committed to serving their communities.

Most of the limited research on service learning's ties to civic engagement has been done in primary and secondary school settings. It has been unclear whether there is a connection to civic engagement at the community college level. Discovering such a connection may allow service learning coordinators and faculty to foster greater awareness of how students, learning the curriculum through local service learning placements, can also become active community participants.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the relationship between service learning participation and civic knowledge and commitment in community college students, AACC used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. To explore the relationship quantitatively, AACC created pre-course and post-course civic engagement surveys based on reviews of several K–12 and higher education civic engagement instruments. Both surveys contained the same 27 questions, all focusing on civic knowledge and civic commitment. The post-course survey had an additional seven questions focusing on the service learning experience itself.

The eight *Horizons* grantee colleges administered both surveys from fall 2004 through spring 2006. Four previous grantee colleges (*Horizons* “alumni”) also administered the surveys during the same period. The service learning coordinator at each college selected the courses to be surveyed, with a mix of service learning and non-service learning courses. Additionally, to understand how service learning is seen by students as connected to civic engagement in specific, individual ways, AACC conducted seven focus groups at four *Horizons* colleges during spring and summer 2006.

By the end of the two-year period, the 12 colleges returned a total of 1,107 pre-course and post-course surveys. Of those, 10 colleges submitted 848 matching pre- and post-course surveys from 424 students (i.e., two surveys per student). The other two colleges sent surveys that could not be matched and therefore were not analyzed for this study.

Of the 424 pairs of surveys, 279 were completed by students who participated in service learning (“service learners” or “SL students”), and 145 by students who did not participate in service learning (“non-service learners” or “NSL students”). NSL students were surveyed in courses that were similar to the courses that required service learning participation and in courses that offered service learning as an option.

ANALYSIS

Upon initial analysis of pre-course survey responses, 56 of the 145 NSL respondents indicated that they had previously taken at least one course in which service learning was offered. To ensure that only non-service learning students who had no previous service learning experience would be compared to service learning students for this study, the 56 non-service learning students who had indicated previous experience were excluded from the data analysis.

Forty percent of students who participated in service learning in the surveyed academic terms also revealed that they had previously participated in service learning in prior college courses. Of the 279 service learning students, 168 had no previous experience with service learning, 64 had taken one service learning course previously, 24 had taken two courses, 10 had taken three courses, five had taken four courses, and eight had taken five courses with service learning.

In order to assess whether participating in service learning for just one term influenced civic engagement levels, the 168 service learning students with no previous experience were compared as a group to the non-service learning students. To assess how participation in service learning in multiple courses influenced civic engagement levels, the 111 service learning students with one or more previous service learning experiences were also compared to the non-service learning students.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographics presented in table 1 break down the characteristics of the 111 service learning students who had taken one or more service learning courses (“experienced SL students”), the 168 service learning students with no previous service learning exposure (“first-time SL students”), and the 89 non-service learning students with no previous service learning exposure (“non-SL students”).

TABLE 1 Respondents' Demographics

Experienced SL Students (111)	First-time SL Students (168)	Non-SL Students (89)
Age		
80% under 25 years old	82% under 25 years old	71% under 25 years old
19% 25 years or older	18% 25 years or older	29% 25 years or older
1% unknown		
Enrollment status		
83% full-time students	70% full-time students	80% full-time students
17% part-time students	30% part-time students	20% part-time students
Employment status		
16% work full-time	36% work full-time	15% work full-time
65% work part-time	40% work part-time	64% work part-time
19% do not work	24% do not work	21% do not work
Caretaker responsibilities		
26% caretakers of family members	23% caretakers of family members	28% caretakers of family members
Previous 12-month volunteer activity		
10% volunteered regularly	16% volunteered regularly	22% volunteered regularly
47% volunteered occasionally	42% volunteered occasionally	54% volunteered occasionally
43% did not volunteer	42% did not volunteer	24% did not volunteer

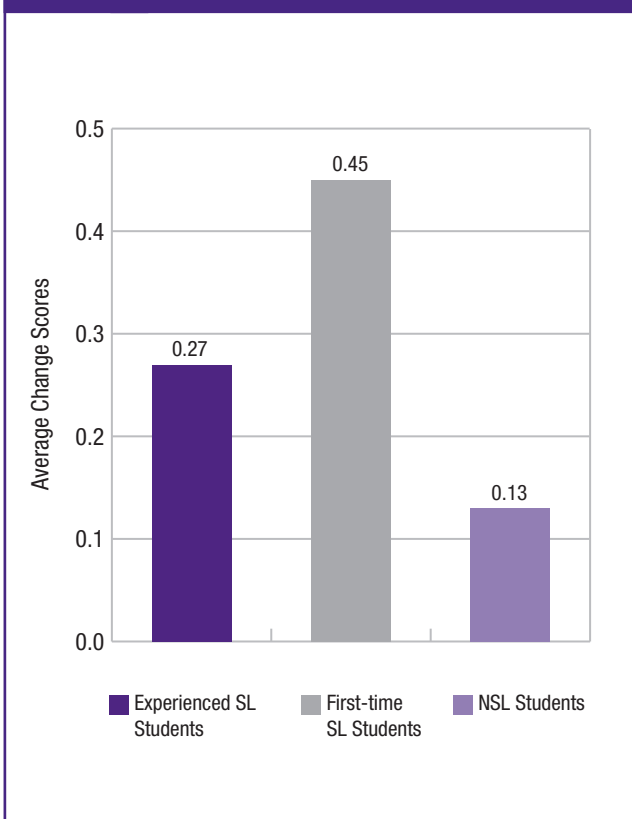
While there appear to be differences when comparing non-SL students to both first-time SL students and experienced SL students, when tested, they did not differ significantly in terms of demographics.

GENERAL FINDINGS

In an effort to draw conclusions about any role that service learning played in changes from pre-course survey scores to post-course survey scores, AACC compared the changes from pre- to post-course survey scores between the service learning students and non-service learning students.

To do this, AACC statistically compared the change scores (pre-course survey scores subtracted from post-course survey scores) of first-time SL students and NSL students and found that the first-time SL students had a statistically significant greater change in scores than the NSL students (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1 Average change in scores from pre-course survey to post-course survey



AACC then compared the change scores of experienced SL students and first-time SL students, and again found a difference; first-time SL students had a greater change in scores than experienced SL students (see figure 1). This may be because initial experiences result in greater change than subsequent ones.

To complete the statistical analyses, the post-course civic engagement surveys were compared. The comparison between experienced service learners, first-time service learners, and non-service learners uncovered a significant difference in post-course survey scores. This indicates that, in this study, there seemed to be a relationship between service learning participation and increased civic knowledge and commitment (see figure 2). Experienced service learners appear to be more knowledgeable about and committed to serving their communities.

REVIEW OF INDIVIDUAL ITEMS

When individual questions were reviewed, only five items stood out as having large differences

FIGURE 2 Percentage of survey questions eliciting “strongly agree” responses on post-course survey

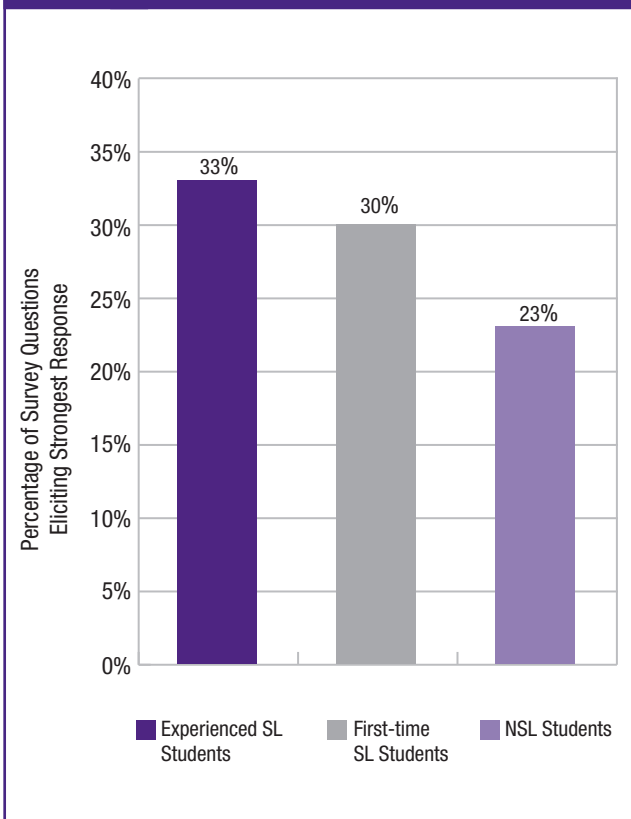


FIGURE 3 Survey questions with large differences in post-course responses

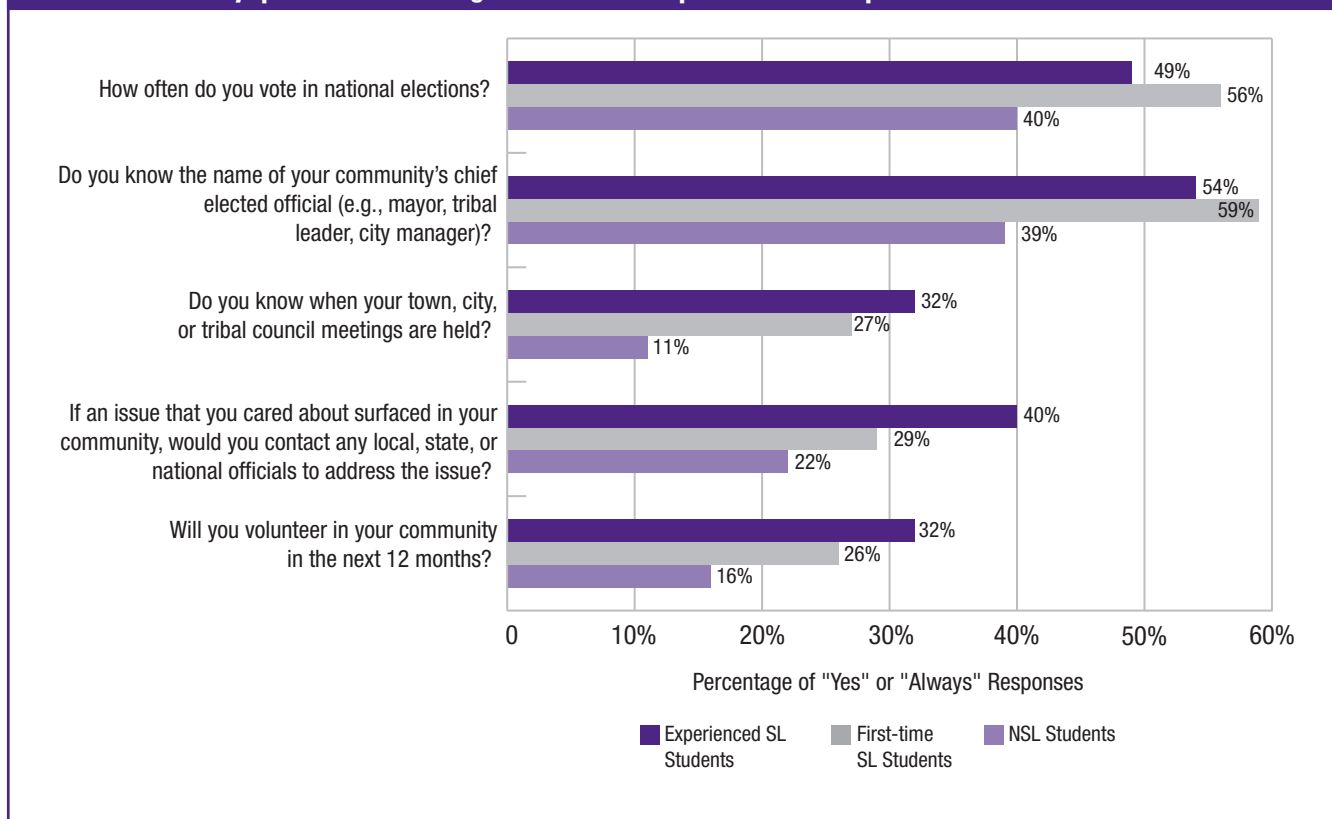
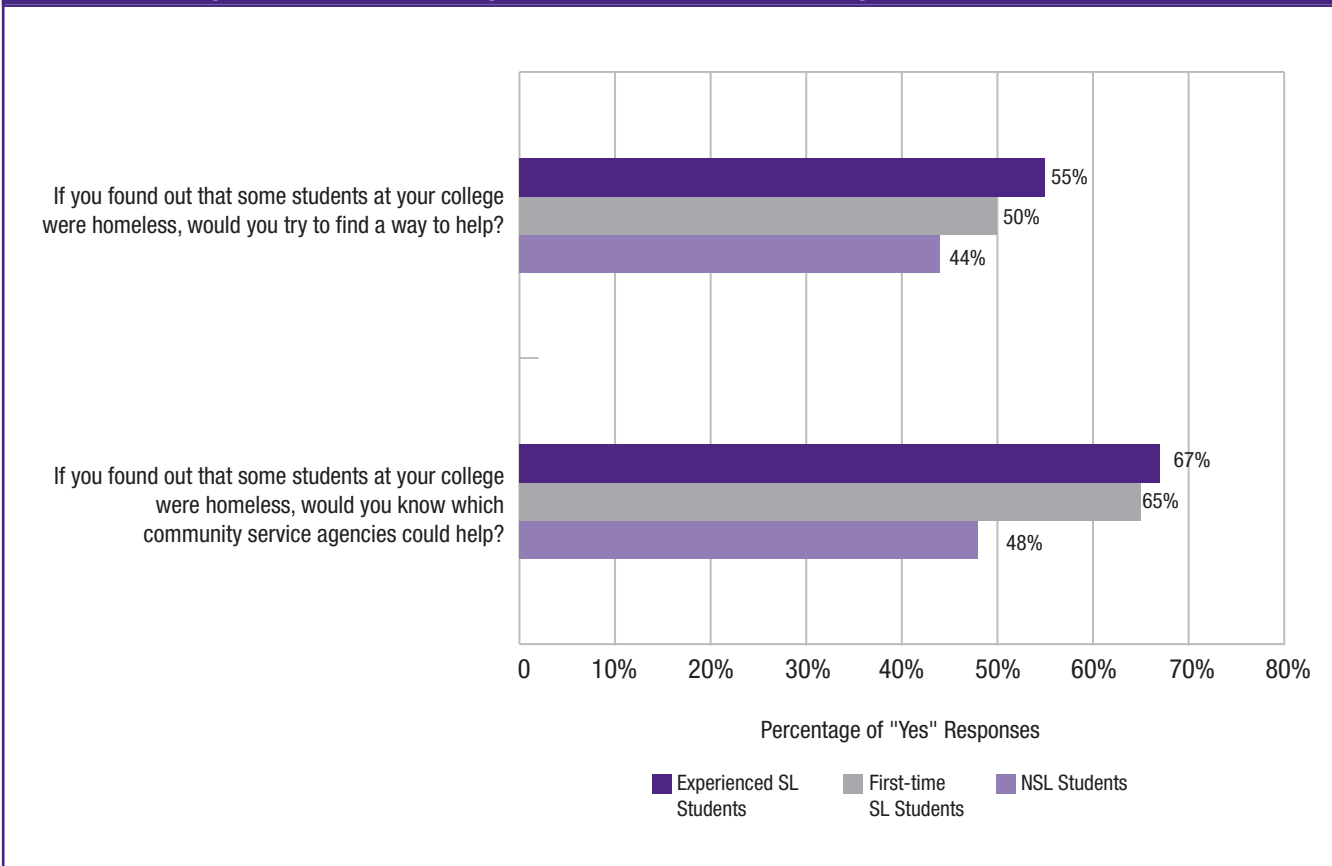


FIGURE 4 Comparison of desire to help and knowledge of how to help



between experienced SL students, first-time SL students, and NSL students (see figure 3). While it is not known how important these questions are in understanding the larger survey construct of civic engagement, the different group responses to these questions appear interesting. Importantly, an additional two questions concerning desire to help a person in need and knowledge about how to help revealed that, while both service learners and non-service learners would desire to help once they had identified a need, the service learners would be more likely to *know* how to help (see figure 4).

Finally, to address AACC's end outcome on civic knowledge and civic commitment, results indicated that the majority of experienced SL students, first-time SL students, and the combination of all SL students affirmed that service learning increased their knowledge of community needs and increased their commitment to continue serving in their communities (see figure 5). At the end of AACC's two-year study, the outcome measures of

fostering civic engagement knowledge and commitment in at least 50 percent of service learning participants were surpassed.

The final set of quantitative results came from analyses of six questions directed at service learning students on the post-course survey. The SL students reported that service learning had made them aware of personal biases; shown them how to become involved in the community; and helped them develop a better sense of their role as community members (see figure 6). Service learning students also reported that service learning helped them to see how their course material could be used in everyday life; that service learning should be practiced in more courses at their college; and that they would encourage other students to take service learning courses (see figure 7). For these six questions, there were no significant differences in responses between the first-time SL students and the experienced SL students.

FIGURE 5 Service learning student responses on knowledge of and commitment to civic engagement

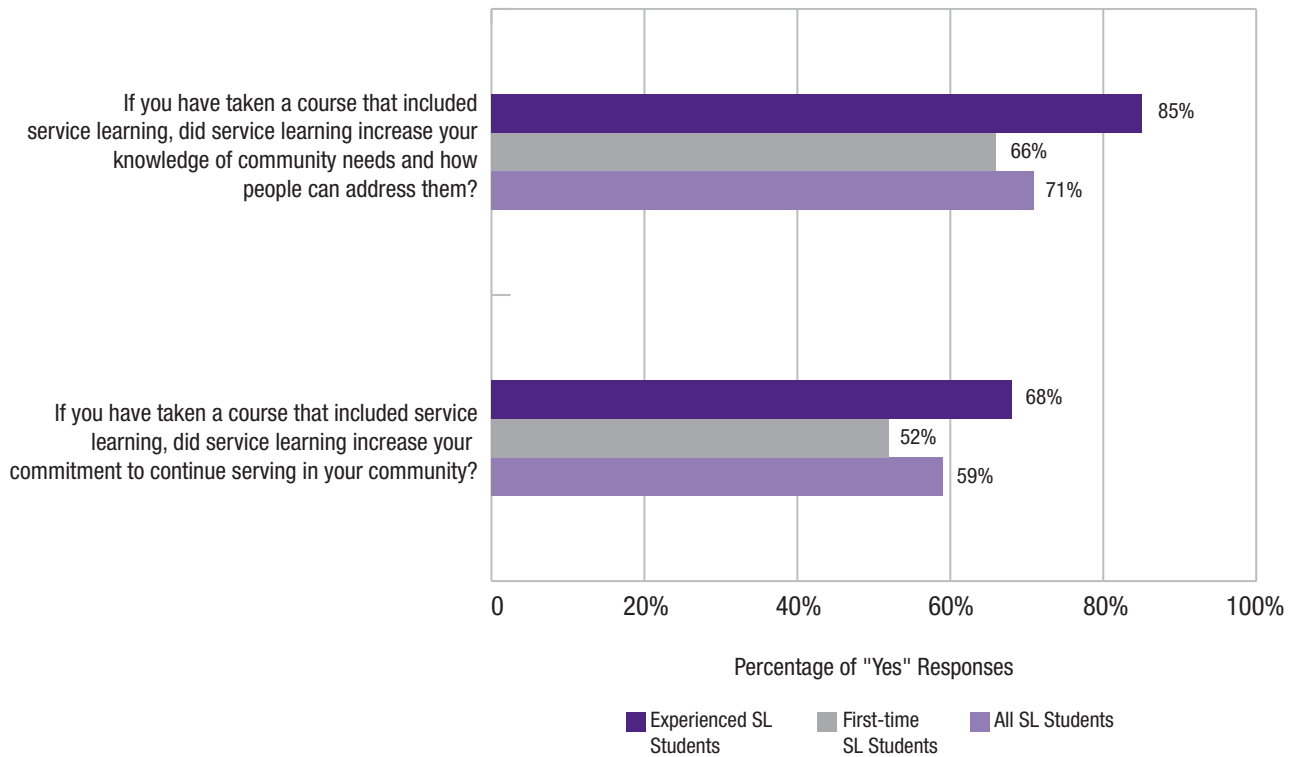


FIGURE 6 Service learning student responses regarding community involvement

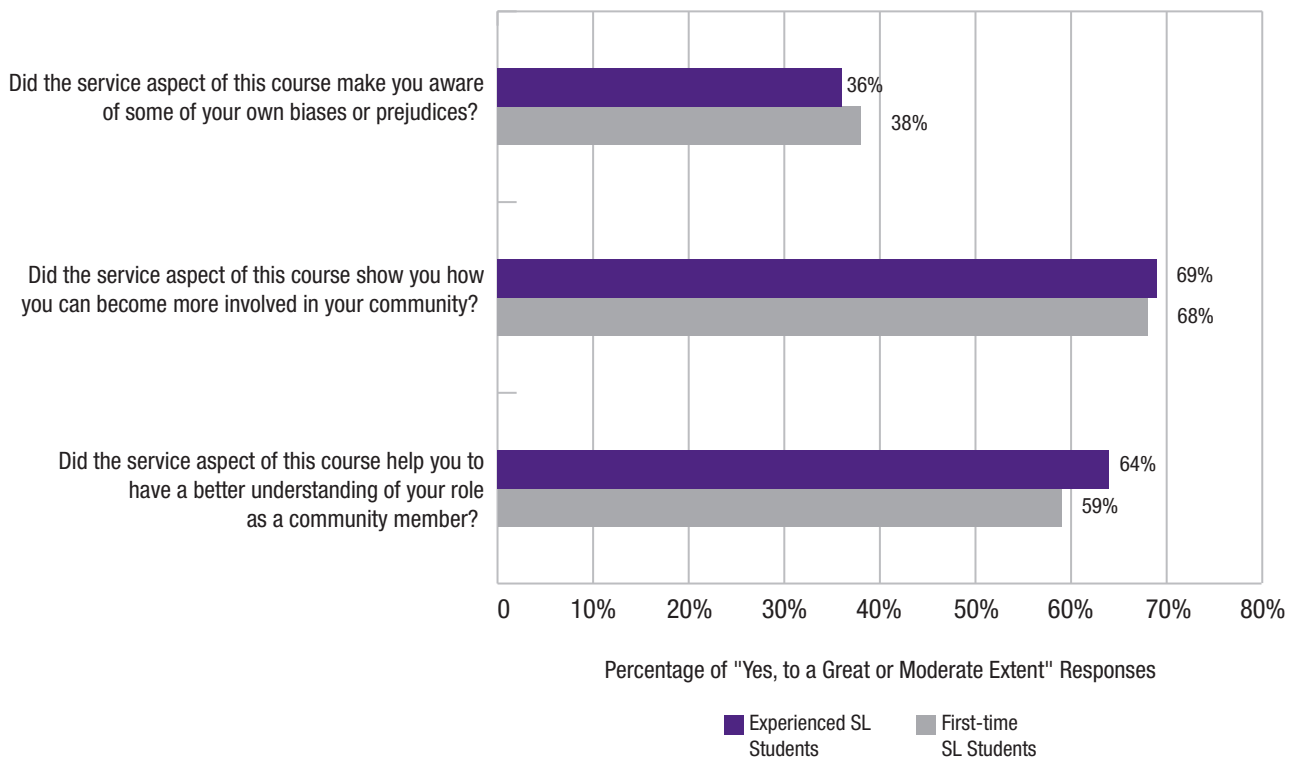
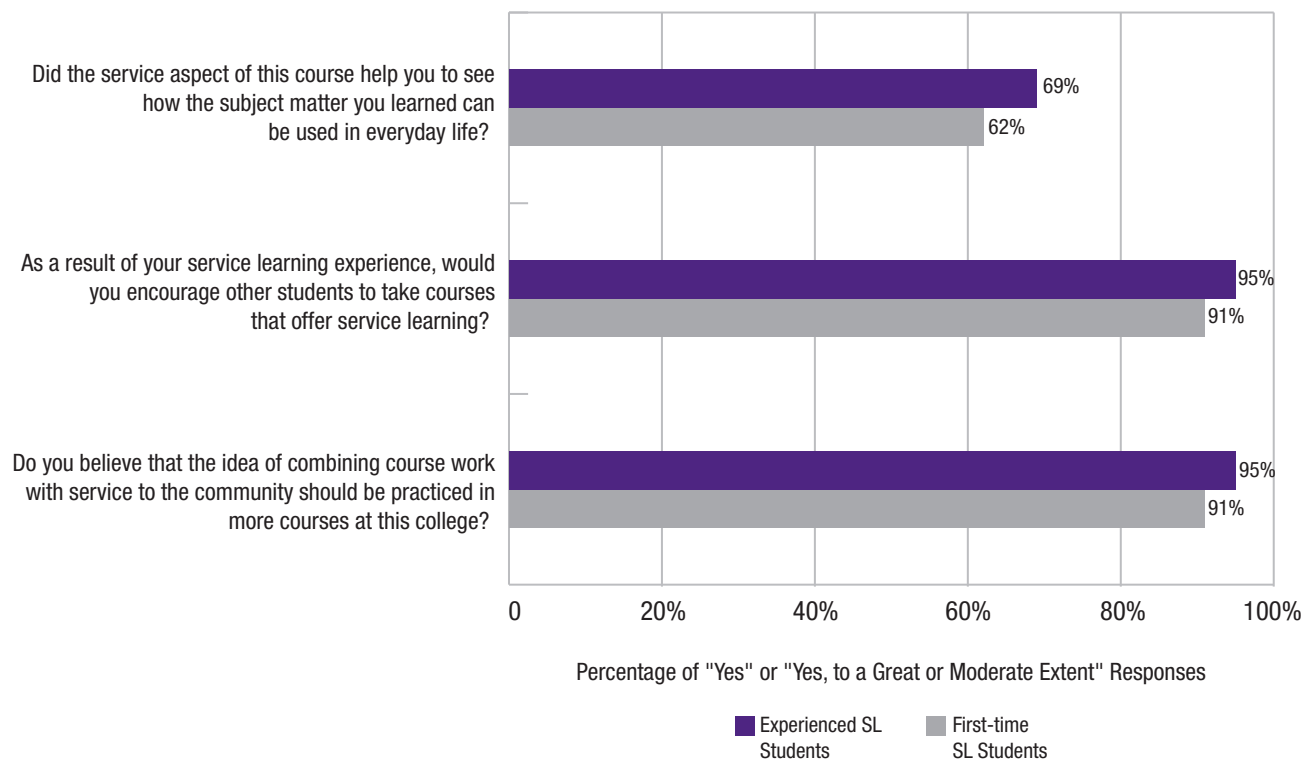


FIGURE 7 Service learning student responses regarding academic impact of service learning



FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

AACC conducted seven focus groups at four of the grantee institutions. One college, Anne Arundel Community College, had offered service learning for several years, while the other three, Chattahoochee Technical College, Western Technical College, and Prince George’s Community College, were newer to service learning. All four colleges participated in the survey research. The number of service learning courses in which the focus group participants had enrolled may be seen in figure 8.

AACC asked the 59 participants about possible connections they had made between their service learning participation and development of greater civic awareness and motivation for increased involvement in their communities. Three common themes emerged from the focus groups:

- Service learning participation was perceived to increase students’ knowledge of civic and community needs as well as where to go for solutions.

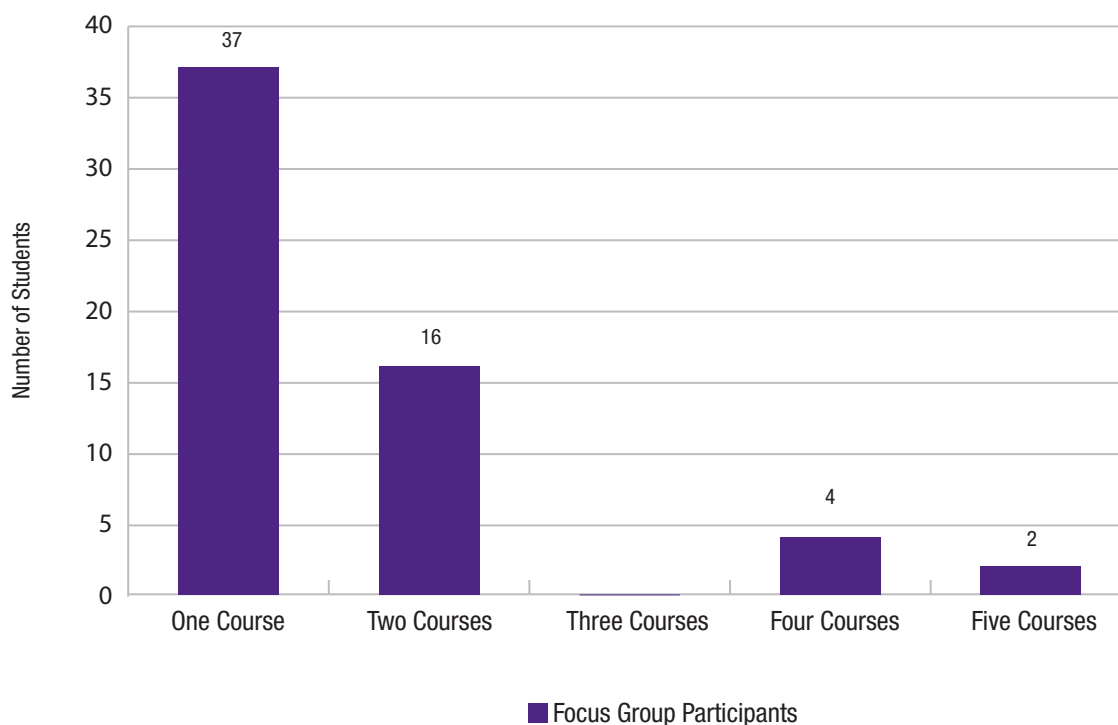
- Service learning participation was perceived to increase students’ commitment to continue being involved in the community.
- Service learning participation helped students have a better understanding of their role as community members.

KNOWLEDGE OF CIVIC AND COMMUNITY NEEDS

Students described a variety of service learning experiences that led to a greater understanding of problems and solutions that exist in their communities. One student whose goal is to become a teacher explained:

“You know that there’s domestic violence and abusive homes, but you don’t really understand it as well until you’re right there with them . . . Now I have the address and phone number [for the agency]. If something like that happened in my classroom or if I saw the signs in a parent, I would definitely give that advice to them.”

FIGURE 8 Focus group members' experience with service learning



Another student stated:

“Once you know about it [the local issue or problem], you can’t go back to pretending you don’t know about it. Once your eyes are open, they’re open. And once you know the need’s there, you can’t turn back.”

A third student reflected on his gains in awareness of community issues and how this led him to want to know more about what is happening in his community:

“I have aspirations to find out what’s going on in the county. What’s happening to my taxes? I don’t think that they’re being utilized correctly. So, where are they going? That’s one issue I really have a problem with. We’re talking about homeless people. We’re talking about single parents. We’re talking about senior citizens. So, what’s going on in the county or on these committees that funds can’t get to where they need to go? I still have to have that answer.”

COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The majority of students also expressed an increased commitment to community involvement after participating in service learning, such as:

“I think the more you get into service learning, the more you want to get involved in your community and see where you can really make a change in a situation.”

Reinforcing this idea, another student responded:

“[Service learning] has strengthened my commitment to want to go in there. Once you know a problem is there, you can’t really turn your back and just pretend you never really saw that need.”

A third student reflected that:

“I read the newspapers and every area has a section where they [list] town hall meetings. And I always

say, ‘Oh, you know, boy! I think I’ll go.’ I’m thinking about it, but I’m not acting on it. And there are some issues that are being discussed that will involve me. Several weeks ago they had a town hall meeting discussing the [subway] system. I was right near where it was taking place, but I chose not to go. But what I’m going to do in the future is get involved . . . I can’t complain if I’m not there to help make change.”

ROLE AS COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Service learning participation also seemed to spur students to believe that being active community members, even in small ways, was important for their community. One student connected community problems with a lack of involvement by community members. She stated:

“I believe that some of [the] things that happen now are because of lack of involvement from role models. And so, you try to reach as many young children as you can by helping out with them, by helping out with the elderly, by helping out with battered women. And just, you know, make a step to accept your role in the community. And everybody accepts his role together. And then society is changed.”

Another student explained how she understood her community member role as a response to perceived apathy:

“A lot of people say, ‘I’m not going to do this because it’s not going to make a difference.’ Or, you know, people just don’t care. You can’t give up, you can’t just say, ‘Okay, that’s it. I’m not doing this anymore because people just don’t care anymore.’ So, because people don’t care about anything anymore, does that mean you’re not going to care?”

In another focus group, two students discussed the importance of everyone claiming their roles as active community members. The first student believed that citizens should assert their responsibility as civic participants. She began:

“It takes baby steps to step up to the plate. I think it’s our civic duty and our responsibility as Americans.”

Another student then added, “And as human beings.”

AN ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON CITIZENSHIP

As the focus group responses indicated, the degree of community involvement can vary among those who are civically engaged. One perspective on what these differences may be comes from research done by Westheimer and Kahne (2004). They suggested that there are three types of citizenship. Personally responsible citizens pick up litter, give blood, and donate to the local food drive. Such citizenship is characterized by individual involvement. Participatory citizens participate “in the civic affairs and social life of the community” (p. 242). These people organize the food drive to which personally responsible citizens contribute. Finally, justice-oriented citizens go beyond helping to work on eliminating the root causes of problems. These citizens would be “asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover” (p. 242).

To explore how these patterns of citizenship occur in community college students, AACC grouped questions from its survey according to Westheimer and Kahne’s citizenship categories. Analyses were conducted comparing each of the service learning groups (first-time service learners and experienced service learners) to the non-service learners.

First-time service learning students scored statistically significantly higher on personally responsible citizenship and participatory citizenship when compared to non-service learners. Experienced service learners scored statistically significantly higher on all three citizenship types when compared to non-service learners.

These results, when combined with the AACC survey results, lend further support to the idea that additional exposure to service learning seems to result in a deeper understanding of civic engagement.

IMPLICATIONS

From this study with community college students, it appears that service learning participation may have led to greater civic engagement for the majority of students. Many students reported that, had it not been for service learning, they either would not have known how to or not taken the time to become involved in the community.

If one role of higher education is to produce individuals who have skills to foster the civic life of the community, then one approach to help achieve that goal appears to be making service learning participation available to all students. Additionally, to increase civic skills even further, faculty could provide students with service learning opportunities in multiple courses each academic term.

In this study, students who participated in service learning even one time appear to have made gains in knowledge of and commitment to civic engagement when compared to non-service learners. Students who had participated in service learning more than once appear to have made greater gains in knowledge of and commitment to civic engagement when compared to non-service learners.

This study suggests that, when students experience this method of learning, many will choose service learning opportunities in the future. While students may choose to continue participating in service learning because the pedagogy helps them learn the academic material, for the students in AACC's study, the more service learning experiences they had, the more they also learned about being civically active.

LIMITATIONS

While the results of this study are encouraging, several limitations to the study's conclusions should be highlighted. First, AACC did not gather data about the type of service learning experience students had. It is possible, therefore, that one group of service learners

may have had experiences that differed in time commitment, duration, or group involvement. For example, experienced service learners may have been involved in a service learning project that the whole class participated in, whereas the first-time service learners may have been more likely to participate in their service learning projects individually.

Without information on the type of experience, it is impossible to ascertain the degree of similarity between the two groups' average experiences and thus AACC cannot rule out type of experience as an alternate explanation for the differences in the civic engagement scores between first-time service learners and experienced service learners found in this study.

Additionally, AACC did not ascertain the level of experience or training of faculty who incorporated service learning into their courses. It is possible that some service learners may have taken courses with faculty who had less training or experience in using service learning, while other service learners had courses with more experienced instructors. Faculty experience with service learning could be an alternate explanation for the differences found in this study between the service learning groups.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

To expand the knowledge about the impact of service learning on civic engagement in community college students, the time spent participating in service learning might be studied to investigate what effect this variable has on civic knowledge and commitment. Additionally, studies are needed on the impact of faculty training and experience on student civic engagement.

Finally, an expanded study on the role that service learning may have in developing the three types of citizenship proposed by Westheimer and Kahne is also recommended to broaden the understanding of service learning's influence on community college students in their role as citizens.

CONCLUSION

AACC's study began as an investigation of service learning's role in fostering community college students' civic engagement. Historically, higher education has been charged with igniting this engagement in students; yet in reality, institutions have struggled to find pedagogical methods that would serve as the spark. One method that community college educators have used in pursuit of greater student learning is service learning. From the results of this study, it appears that service learning can also be the educational spark that sets fire to the commitment of students to claim their role as active community members.

While results from past studies have been mixed about whether service learning can fulfill this role, the voices of community college students represented here appear to validate community college educators' use of service learning as the spark that students can use to light the fire of engaged citizenship.

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- Walker, Toby. 2000. The Service/Politics Split: Rethinking Service to Teach Political Engagement. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33(3): 647-649.
- Westheimer, Joel, and Joseph Kahne. 2004. What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy. *American Educational Research Journal* 41(2): 237-269.
- AACC's pre- and post-course civic engagement surveys may be found in appendix F-3 of AACC's *A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum* [Gottlieb and Robinson, eds., second edition (2006)], available at www.aacc.nche.edu/servicelearning.

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

2003-2006 HORIZONS GRANTEE COLLEGES

Chattahoochee Technical College, GA
Hudson Valley Community College, NY *
Kingwood College, TX *
Northern New Mexico College, NM
Northwest Indian College, WA
Prince George's Community College, MD
Sinclair Community College, OH
Western Technical College, WI

1994-2003 HORIZONS ALUMNI COLLEGES

Anne Arundel Community College, MD
Iowa Western Community College, IA
Kapi'olani Community College, HI
Orange Coast College, CA

* Asterisk indicates colleges that did not contribute matched surveys that could be analyzed for this study.

DISCIPLINES REPRESENTED IN THIS STUDY INCLUDE:

Biology
Communication
English
Environmental Science
History
Management
Math
Nursing
Sociology

WEB RESOURCES

American Association of Community Colleges
www.aacc.nche.edu/servicelearning

Campus Compact
www.compact.org

Center for Information and Research on
Civic Learning and Engagement
www.civicyouth.org

Community-Campus Partnerships for Health
www.ccpb.info

Community College National Center for
Community Engagement
www.mc.maricopa.edu/engagement

Corporation for National and Community Service
www.nationalservice.gov

Educators for Community Engagement
www.e4ce.org

Effective Practices Information Center
www.nationalserviceresources.org

Higher Education Network for
Community Engagement
www.henceonline.org

International Association for Research on
Service-Learning and Civic Engagement
www.researchslce.org

International Partnership for
Service-Learning and Leadership
www.ipsl.org

Learn and Serve America
www.learnandserve.gov

National Service Inclusion Project
www.serviceandinclusion.org

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse
www.servicelearning.org

Points of Light & Hands On Network
www.pointsoflight.org

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