The Employment Impacts of Service-Learning Classes

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Introduction

A large-scale movement is underway in higher education to incorporate academic and service-learning experiences into the curriculum. Service-learning (SL) courses engage students with the community, allowing them to apply what they are learning about to real-world, community-identified problems or issues. Bringle & Hatcher (1995) define academic service-learning as: “a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility.”

Research across a range of disciplines and institutional contexts has shown this pedagogy’s positive effects on student outcomes such as personal and civic development, critical thinking, inter-cultural competence, and more (Clayton, Bringle, & Hatcher, 2013; Eyster & Giles, 1999); likewise, it has been shown to increase student learning beyond the effects of traditional pedagogy (Warren, 2012), and is considered an empirically validated “high-impact educational practice” (Kuh, 2008).

SL courses are increasingly available to students: Campus Compact’s annual survey of member institutions found that 95% of responding campuses offer service-learning courses, averaging 66 courses per campus, with 64% of the campuses requiring SL in at least one major (Campus Compact, 2013).

Objective

Taking part in SL has been shown to have some influence on what careers students choose (e.g., Warschil & Ruiz, 2004). The hands-on, experientially-oriented nature of service-learning, as well as SL’s potential development of work skills such as teamwork and project management, have been hypothesized to give students experiences that might help them find jobs more rapidly or at higher wages.

Despite these anecdotal claims, there are no empirical studies of the benefits of such courses in terms of employment and earning outcomes for students. This study addresses that gap through examination of self-reported employment records from a survey of college graduates, two years after graduation.

The hypothesis to be tested is that students who take service-learning classes will have advantages in employment outcomes, such as shorter time to first employment and higher earnings, when compared to peers who did not take SL.

Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Compared to those who did not take service-learning classes, students who did take service-learning courses will be more likely to be employed full-time immediately after college graduation.

Hypothesis 2: Students who took service-learning classes will receive raises and promotions more quickly than those who did not.

Hypothesis 3: Students who engage in service-learning will have higher average earnings than those who did not.

Methods

Respondents who took undergraduate service-learning classes at UGA were paired with those who did not take service-learning classes but were otherwise as similar as possible. Specifically, graduates with SL who sought jobs appear to have gotten full-time (rather than part-time) jobs at a higher rate than those without SL, and their starting salaries were higher on average. There was a trend towards quicker hiring as well. Graduates with SL experience who received raises also got those slightly sooner (about 2.5 months faster) than those without SL, but, those with SL did not seem to have an overall advantage in terms of whether they eventually got promoted or got a raise.

This suggests that employers particularly valued the skills or experiences which applicants with service-learning brought to the hiring table. However, further research investigating employers’ perspectives would help clarify this.

Data

The study used the results of a survey sent to a sample of about 2,000 alumni who graduated with an undergraduate degree in any major from The University of Georgia (UGA) in 2010. Institutional enrollment records were used to determine whether students had enrolled in any service-learning (SL) courses.

The survey, completed during summer 2013, asked respondents to indicate whether they sought and received employment upon graduation, their starting salary, and subsequent employment and pay raises, among other information.

447 valid responses (of 568 total) were returned; after eliminating students who went to graduate school or did not seek employment after college, 276 respondents comprised the data sample: 78 who had not taken SL courses and 198 who had. Figure 3 lists some facts of this sample.

Unique Matching

Respondents who took undergraduate service-learning classes at UGA were paired with those who did not take service-learning classes but were otherwise as similar as possible. Specifically, graduates with SL who sought jobs appear to have gotten full-time (rather than part-time) jobs at a higher rate than those without SL, and their starting salaries were higher on average. There was a trend towards quicker hiring as well. Graduates with SL experience who received raises also got those slightly sooner (about 2.5 months faster) than those without SL, but, those with SL did not seem to have an overall advantage in terms of whether they eventually got promoted or got a raise.

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Discussion

The employment-related impacts of taking service-learning coursework, for our sample of 2010 graduates, appear to manifest mostly in terms of initial employment outcomes. Specifically, graduates with SL who sought jobs appear to have gotten full-time (rather than part-time) jobs at a higher rate than those without SL, and their starting salaries were higher on average. There was a trend towards quicker hiring as well. Graduates with SL experience who received raises also got those slightly sooner (about 2.5 months faster) than those without SL, but, those with SL did not seem to have an overall advantage in terms of whether they eventually got promoted or got a raise.

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Limitations and Conclusions

This study is based on a snapshot of a single year’s graduates from a single university, and relies on self-reported data from respondents who may or may not be representative of all majors and disciplines (including majors where all graduates might have been required to take SL, for instance). Matched pairs were made on key variables of hypothesized importance, but not all differences between respondent pairs were controlled. While we believe that two years post graduation is sufficient time to investigate outcomes relating to initial job placement, many respondents continued to graduate school or otherwise did not initially seek employment. Also, we did not attempt to ascertain whether the particular SL experience that respondents had was relevant to their subsequent career or job.

However, this study’s strengths include its investigation of outcomes beyond short-term impacts; its inclusion of a wide range of disciplines; and close matching of key variables for respondent pairs, to maximize comparisons and minimize bias.

This study helps validate university and student investment in service-learning coursework beyond the pedagogy’s demonstrated impacts on student social, cognitive, and civic outcomes, providing the first empirical estimates of the economic benefits of service-learning classes for students upon entering the job market.

References


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***Pictures taken from UGA Office of Service-Learning website: http://servicelearning.uga.edu