Volunteering Enhances the Social Work Student Experience

Author(s)
Angela Curl, PhD   Kalea Benner, PhD
Miami University (Ohio)   University of Kentucky

Abstract

While field education has been designated the signature pedagogy of the social work curriculum, students often have exposure to social welfare agencies long before practicum semester(s). Despite the number of social work programs that utilize volunteering to help students better understand the social work profession, little is known about the effects of volunteering on academic measures as well as the student. This study (N=67) found that volunteering has considerable positive benefits for the implicit curriculum through socializing the student, providing a real world context, and embodying the professional value of service.

Keywords: volunteering, service learning, implicit curriculum

Introduction and Background

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) has designated field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. Experiential learning within social welfare agencies and settings provides a capstone experience for students allowing integration of curriculum and providing evidence-informed knowledge of the connection between the curriculum and a real life context (Bradley, et al., 2015). However, many social work students are completing service hours long before entering the capstone practicums; Schelbe, Petracchi, and Weaver (2014) found that 80% of responding accredited BASW programs (N=202) required service learning in addition to field practicums.

As the social work profession shifts toward a competency based approach, students

can benefit from additional opportunities to develop practice skills prior to field (Phillips, 2011). Volunteering early in the student's academic career can provide opportunities to better understand the social work profession, gain exposure to populations and environments different from the student's own, and allows for personal growth in developing skills and knowledge related to the chosen profession.

One formal academic way of volunteering is through service learning, which is often integrated early in college curricula in social work and other disciplines. Service learning is applied, experiential learning based on the premise that actively engaged learners assimilate information better (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Service learning also helps develop skills related to problem solving and critical and integrative thinking (Bradley, et al., 2015). Finally, service learning in social welfare agencies and settings facilitates an increase in a student's sense of efficacy, awareness of the environment beyond the personal context, engagement with student colleagues and faculty, and heightens awareness of values that may be conflicted in unfamiliar environments (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

However, students also participate in less formal service through volunteering. Students may volunteer on their own or at the recommendation of an advisor or faculty member without the expectation that the service is associated with a specific course. A key aspect to differentiating service learning from volunteering is the role of service learning in the classroom (Harrington, 2016). Whereas volunteering may have no specific role in the course curriculum, inherent in service learning is the class required reflection with peers and faculty that helps to generate learning and deepen understanding of the influence of engagement in learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009). One example of discrepancies in course expectations for service is the introductory course to the social work profession. Most programs have an introductory course and many require service hours; how those hours are integrated into the course content may vary. Some programs apply course discussion and reflection while others utilize the hours to augment exposure to social welfare agencies without course integration, thus differentiating between service learning and volunteering.

The idea of volunteering is often introduced early to social work students, yet there is little information regarding the role of volunteering within social work curriculum. Service is a professional value and helps the student gain understanding and awareness of the professional self. In addition, service through volunteering can heighten exposure to diversity, challenge existing beliefs about diversity, and aid in the development of cultural competency (Jones, 2011; Maccio, 2011; Simons & Cleary, 2006). Volunteering provides exposure to different life situations and needs, and

becomes transformative for the student by connecting learning with doing (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). In particular, exposure through volunteering can provide a sense of competence for the student who is learning to become a practitioner in the competency-based social work profession (Rocha, 2000).

Nino, Cuevas, and Loya (2011) indicate that volunteering provides a greater awareness of community needs and resources as well as a sense of empowerment to work with people in need. In addition to benefitting the student, volunteering also promotes civic engagement (Simons & Cleary, 2006), helps strengthen ties with community partners (Brown & Kinsella, 2006), and promotes a positive image of the university and good will within the community in helping meet agency needs (Chupp & Joseph, 2010).

While much is known about the benefits of service learning and the field practicum, little is known about the academic influences and role of volunteering in preparing for the field experience. This study sought to contribute to the literature by answering the following research questions:

1. To what extent does volunteering impact academic consequences related to GPA or assignment and reading completion for social work students?

2. How does volunteering impact social work students?

Methodology

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, a survey was sent out via email listserve to all undergraduate and graduate social work students at a large public university in the Midwest. Sixty-nine of the 328 students responded to the online survey. After eliminating two responses due to missing data, the sample size for this survey was 67 (21 undergraduate and 46 graduate students), resulting in a 21% response rate.

Measures

This survey included 10 questions related to academics. Students were asked to indicate their current grade point average (GPA) and were instructed that it was acceptable to estimate. They were asked to identify the percentage of required readings they completed on average (e.g., 10-19%, 20-29%). Students were also asked to define to how they agreed or disagreed with the following statements accurately reflecting their academic process: "spend sufficient time studying for exams," "able to do my

best on assignments," "spend sufficient time working on assignments," "could do better in class if had more time for academics," "well prepared for exams," "read all the required materials for class," "happy with my grades," and "feel that my grades reflect my level of effort" (1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree).

For volunteering, students were asked if they were currently a volunteer (yes or no) and how many total hours per week that they volunteer on average. They were asked whether their volunteer work was related to their degree (yes or no) and whether they would prefer to work more or less hours (like to volunteer more hours, like to volunteer fewer hours, like to continue volunteering the same number of hours). For these two questions, if students have more than one volunteer position, they were instructed to base their answer on the position for which they volunteer the most hours per week. Students were asked to indicate their major reason(s) for volunteering, and given the following response choices: "to meet the need," "to build resume," "degree program recommends volunteering," and "other" with a write-in text box. Students were also asked what effect volunteering has on their studies (positive effect, no effect, or negative effect). This was based on the measure about impact of employment on academics used by Orszag, Orszag, and Whitmore in their 2001 study. In addition, students were asked the following open-ended question: "In what ways has volunteering affected your academic success?"

Demographic questions included age, gender, race, ethnicity, student level, and student status. Age was asked as an open-ended question. For gender, students could respond that they were male, female, transgender, or preferred not to say. For race, students were asked to check all that applied: White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan Native, or Other. For ethnicity, students were asked whether they considered themselves Hispanic or Latino(a): yes, no, or prefer not to say. For student status, the response options were: undergraduate student, graduate student, non-degree seeking student, or not a student. For undergraduate student level, respondents could check Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, or Senior.

Results

The majority of respondents were female (89.6%), White (91.0%), and non-Hispanic (98.5%). Other than gender, this is generally consistent with the university's enrollment statistics: 76.4% White and 99.9% non-Hispanic (full enrollment statistics for the university can be found at http://ir.missouri.edu/enrollment/e3-a.pdf). Women made up 52.8% of the total university enrollment, but females tend to be overrepresented

within social work education. The average age of respondents was 28.03 (*SD*=9.65; range 18-61).

Just over half of the sample (50.7%, *n*=34) reported that they were currently volunteering. The current volunteers reported an average of 6.34 hours spent volunteering per week (*SD*=8.16; range .50-40.0), and three-quarters said that their volunteer work was related to their degree. The main reason for volunteering was to meet needs, followed by resume building, and degree program recommendations. Half said that volunteering has no effect on their studies, while 41.2% said it has a positive effect. Table 1 describes the volunteer characteristics for the sample as a whole as well as by student level. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to test for group differences (volunteers vs. non-volunteers) in mean scores on GPA and the Likert-scale items related to academic preparedness and satisfaction, but no significant differences were found (results not shown).

Table 1

Responses to Quantitative Volunteer Items for Sample as a Whole and by Student Level

	Undergraduate Students	Graduate Students	Total Sample
	(*n*=21)	(*n*=46)	(N=67)
Currently Volunteering	61.9% (*n*=13)	45.7% (*n*=21)	50.7%
Volunteer hours/week[a]	*M*=6.54 (*SD*=8.10)	*M*=6.21 (*SD*=8.39)	*M*=6.34 (*SD*=8.16)
Volunteering related to degree	76.9% (*n*=10)	76.2% (*n*=16)	76.5%
Major reason for volunteering			
• To meet need	84.6% (*n*=11)	76.2% (*n*=16)	79.4%
• To build resume	61.5% (*n*=8)	38.1% (*n*=8)	47.1%
• Degree program recommends	61.5% (*n*=8)	14.3% (*n*=3)	32.4%
• Other	7.7% (*n*=1)	9.5% (*n*=2)	8.8%
Effect volunteering has on studies			
• Positive	30.8% (*n*=4)	47.6% (*n*=10)	41.2%
• No effect	61.5% (*n*=8)	42.9% (*n*=9)	50.0%
• Negative	0% (*n*=0)	9.5% (*n*=2)	5.9%
Preferred amount of volunteering			
• Like to volunteer more hours	38.5% (*n*=5)	23.8% (*n*=5)	29.4%
• Like to volunteer fewer hours	23.1% (*n*=3)	19.0% (*n*=4)	20.6%
• Like to volunteer same amount	38.5% (*n*=5)	57.1% (*n*=12)	50.0%

Note. [a]average for students who volunteer

In response to an open-ended question about how volunteering has affected their academic success, a number of themes emerged. The most common response related to obtaining real world experience. Other responses focused on career benefits of volunteering: networking, resume building, helping guide career decisions, and keeping focused on why they entered social work. Course related benefits were also reported by students: serving as a break from studying, studying while volunteering, serving as topics for class papers and projects, and volunteering as part of a class requirement. Some responses indicated that volunteering raised or maintained their social awareness.

One student reported, "[Volunteering] helps me stay aware of the struggles that others are going through which gives me a drive to help those individuals in the future. It keeps me aware of the blessings I have been given, such as having the opportunity to attend college." Another student said, "[Volunteering has] opened my eyes to unfairness and tragedy in the world that I can work to improve."

Only two students mentioned a negative impact of volunteering on their academics, and both related to having less time for studying. Finally, four students said that volunteering has not affected their academic success at all.

Discussion

Despite the time commitment, volunteering has many benefits for social work students. The majority of our respondents indicate that volunteering has a positive effect on academics, and less than six percent believe there is a negative effect. In contrast to other time drains such as employment, where Curl and Benner (2017) found the time investment in working to have a largely negative impact on academics, volunteering seems to augment the learning experience enough that students found positives in serving others. While there is no explicit academic effect, students did identify several implicit curricular effects related to volunteering. Students repeatedly mentioned the "real world" application of their academic learning to the agency environment. Students also identified affirmation of the social work profession as a benefit associated with their volunteering.

Overwhelmingly, the reason that social work students volunteer is to meet a need in the community. Because of this ability to identify and meet the needs of communities, in many ways the volunteer experience is socializing students into the social work profession. As a professional social worker, service is expected and part of a value orientation; as a student, service helps gain understanding and awareness of the professional self. By participating in agencies that are connected to the social work profession, over 76% of the responding students felt their service was directly related to their social work degree.

Students also responded that volunteering affirmed their interest in social work and provided a better understanding of the application of course content, including raising social awareness. Students connected volunteering back to the classroom experience by discussing aspects of their service for various assignments. This supports Celio et al.'s (2011) statement that volunteering is transformative for the student by connecting learning with understanding and applying knowledge.

Limitations and Strengths

There are some limitations of this study that are important to point out. First, our sample consists of students enrolled at only one university. It is likely that the social work student population at this large, public, Midwestern university differs from those at smaller, private institutions. There may also be regional differences in the number of social work students that volunteer and the subsequent influence on academics. Second, caution should be exercised when generalizing our findings due to our small sample size. Further, our low survey response rate may have resulted in sampling bias, as well as precluding the ability to examine potential subgroup differences (e.g., by student level).

Despite known limitations, there are a number of strengths. Field experience is prized in the social work profession and required by all accredited programs. However, many programs also require time in social service agencies prior to that field practicum (Schelbe et al., 2014) and little is known in the literature about the influence of that volunteer time on the social work student. This study contributes to the literature by examining the perceived influence that volunteering has on the social work student and the academic influences of volunteering while enrolled in a social work program.

Future Implications

Through understanding the positive effects of application, socialization, and competency building through volunteering, social work programs can better identify ways to continue to support these endeavors by social work students. Programs can design classes to require volunteering; even when there is not enough class time for integration of true service learning, students can still benefit from exposure to social service agencies. One future question to answer might be whether truly voluntary service (i.e., at student's initiative) differs from less voluntary (i.e., class required) experiences.

Another aspect that we were not able to address in this study was the six percent of students (*n*=2) who felt that volunteering has a negative influence by taking away time from studying. While the negative influence was not indicated by most students, it

might be an area to explore in the future as to why students are volunteering if they believe it is negatively affecting their grades. Again, understanding the difference between voluntary and involuntary volunteering might help identify the positive and negative academic outcomes students associate with volunteering.

Conclusion

While much is known about the strength of the field practicum in anchoring the social work curriculum, little is known about the volunteer experience for social work students and the way that volunteering facilitates preparation of students for field experiences and eventual social work practice. Many students are encouraged to volunteer through social work student organizations and by advisors and faculty instructors. There appears to be no significant academic detriment for the time invested in volunteering but there are multiple associated benefits. Volunteering helps socialize students into the social work profession, aids students in transformative learning where classroom learning is applied in real life contexts, and establishes and promotes the professional value of service as a social work practitioner. All of these implicit curriculum assets validate the use of volunteering as a means to support social work education.

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