



DOES REQUIRED VOLUNTEERING WORK?

Results from Ontario's High School Community Service Program

Social Economy Fact Sheet #23

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Birds' Eye View

Three studies explore four key questions:

Basic program impact:

Does the program expose high school students to community service who would not otherwise become involved?

Does community service through Ontario's mandatory program affect future civic engagement?

Student response:

Do students consider the service undertaken to fulfill this high school requirement significant and positive?

Does their response to mandated community service vary and, if so, why?

Growing recognition of the existence of a social economy has highlighted the important role of the voluntary and not-for-profit sector in what was once largely the domain of public and private entities. As governments have come to appreciate this sector's contribution to healthy communities, they have also grown concerned about steeply declining levels of civic engagement among young people – the very people who in coming decades will be responsible for sustaining the social economy. Ontario, like many jurisdictions, responded by introducing a compulsory 40 hours of public service into the high school curriculum. In three different studies, Padanyi, Baetz and Brown explored the effectiveness of this approach and whether it carried over into students' lives after high school.

Ambitious Goals But Programs Not Well Structured

Ontario introduced a mandatory community service program into its high school curriculum in 1999. Since 2003, all students must complete 40 hours of public service to graduate.

Unlike similar programs elsewhere, however, this one is not well structured. Details regarding the type of community service eligible for credit, the extent of assistance from school personnel, and the program's relationship to the regular curriculum are left up to local school boards. This situation, and cuts to funding for core programs in the 1990s, mean many high schools provide only minimal support. For some, involvement often consists solely of collecting the sheets confirming students' activity and recording data for transcript purposes.

Students questioned whether compulsory public service was really "volunteering," and attitudes towards volunteering mainly reflected family, religious and peer values. Most (88%) had volunteered before, with no external prompting.

Despite this lack of structure, the Ministry of Education explicitly states that the purpose of mandatory service is to "encourage students to develop awareness and understanding of civic responsibility and of the role they can play in supporting and strengthening their communities."

In Their Own Words: Student Attitudes Toward the High School Program

"The 40 hours were not volunteering, because students are receiving something in return and they were told they had to."

"In high school, it just meant graduating. I guess I got something out of it but the majority of time we were forced into it..."

"Forty hours forces students to give back to the community and it can help people start doing that. Some people don't put in the effort because they have to do it."

"(Volunteering is) something you do on your own time and that you do for someone else...so you are not forced like the hours you do in high school."

"I think there are two different types (of volunteering) - something that gets you 40 hours versus what you want to do. The 40 hours you do in high school gets you going and leads you into more volunteering."

"I definitely went beyond the 40. I knew it looked better...If an employer knew you only needed 40, and saw that you only did the minimal, it looks very bare minimal and getting 40 looked very entry [sic] and doesn't look like you're doing it for the right causes."

"I think the majority of people just volunteered because they needed to graduate. Maybe one or two volunteered out of the goodness of their heart. But for most people I think they just felt like they were forced. They felt it was just another class or credit that they needed to graduate. At some schools there wasn't even any guidance for it."

Three Studies

Study 1 - was designed around the assumption that Dewey's "principle of continuity" has relevance to student volunteering. This principle states that "all experience occurs along a continuum...(and) experiences build on previous ones." (Dewey, 1938)

Focus: "Does the program result in exposure to community service for high school students who would not otherwise become involved?" and "Do students consider the service they undertook to fulfill their high school requirement to be significant and positive?"

Method: In Fall 2007, we surveyed 198 undergraduate business students enrolled in a core second year course on Organizational Behaviour at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario. We asked students to indicate the extent to which they were involved in volunteering/community service during various educational periods in their life and to comment on how these experiences affected them personally, whether negatively or positively.

Study 2 - was concerned with whether mandatory community service in high school exploits the school system as an agent of socialization (Schachter 1998). Proponents of mandated service argue that there are positive effects regardless of why it was undertaken in the first place. Critics worry that compelling service may have negative effects on subsequent volunteering.

Focus: "Does the program introduce high school students to the voluntary sector who would not otherwise have had that exposure?" and "Does exposure to community service through the mandatory program encourage future civic engagement?"

Method: In Winter 2007, we invited all fourth year students at Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Guelph to complete an online survey dealing with student experiences in both university and high school. The questionnaire also asked about the breadth and duration of their high school volunteering, enjoyment associated with service placements, and motives. The final sample for this study was 820 students.

Study 3 - was designed to address the possibility that the above-noted proponents and critics could both be correct since high school populations are very heterogeneous. Helping behaviour theory (Schwartz 1977) was used as the basis for segmenting student respondents.

Focus: "Does student response to mandated community service in high school vary and, if so, why?"

Method: In Winter 2007, almost 1300 first year students at four post-secondary institutions in Southwestern Ontario answered an on-line survey. In Winter 2008, 20 first year University of Guelph students were interviewed in depth.

Key Findings

* Ontario's mandatory high school community service program is somewhat successful in that it exposes more students to the voluntary sector. However, among university-bound graduates, the proportion may be small since a high percentage (85-88%) have already experienced other volunteering experiences. Notably, many (67%) volunteered during elementary school. For these students, the program provides "supplementary" or "reinforcing" exposure rather than the expected initial exposure to community service.

* There is little support for the idea that forcing high school students to volunteer pays off in subsequent community service down the road. Students who probably would not have volunteered in high school if they were not required to (the students for whom this high school program was most intended) were no more likely to volunteer later in life than those who did no volunteering in high school.

* There is also little support for the idea that mandated service "poisons the well" for future volunteering. Whether early service was mandated or freely chosen was not found to relate to subsequent activity levels.

* The mandatory service experience that students undertook to graduate from high school was not felt to be significant, in a positive sense, by most university students. Many did not view it as genuine "volunteering", but rather as either a "forced" activity or something done entirely for personal benefit.

* Students can be segmented into three groups with regard to the high school community service program:

1. Those who do the required 40 hours only (15%).
2. Those who do 40 hours plus an additional amount under 40 hours (36%).
3. Those who do 40 hours plus an additional amount over 40 hours (49%).

1. High school students who do only enough community service to graduate:

- come from families that do not emphasize volunteering or religion,
- are not interested in volunteering or community service organizations,
- do not feel a strong sense of civic responsibility toward others, and
- tend to feel that people are responsible for themselves.

In terms of helping behaviour,

- they have been activated by outside forces,
- have a low sense of obligation, and
- are highly defensive, associating many costs with volunteering.

2. High school students who do

- a little more than is required:
- have parents who volunteer,
- may not attend church regularly but religion is stressed at home,
- have a moderate sense of civic responsibility,
- are somewhat trusting of other people, and are tolerant of those from different backgrounds.

In terms of helping behaviour,

- they were activated prior to high school,
- have a moderate sense of obligation, and
- cite fairly pragmatic costs (too busy, don't know of opportunities) as their defense for not volunteering at the present time.

3. High school students who do a lot more than required

- have parents who volunteer and/or come from homes stressing religion,
- believe that people should help others, and
- tend to be very trusting of others and open-minded about people from different backgrounds.

In terms of helping behaviour,

- they were activated prior to high school,
- have a strong sense of obligation, and
- are not defensive about volunteering, indeed love it and endorse it as a way to contribute to society.



A Further Consideration

All three studies pointed to the need to better educate students and all stakeholders about the goals and objectives of mandatory community service in high school. This might best be achieved by positioning the program as a form of “community service learning” (CSL). CSL is a well-recognized pedagogical approach that allows students to work directly with community-based social purpose organizations such as nonprofits, service clubs, co-operatives and government offices on projects or activities that these organizations need help with. CSL is an approach to education that has more direct benefits for both students and the community organizations they work with than the current unstructured, mandated program in Ontario. Positioning the high school requirement as CSL could elevate the exercise in the minds of all stakeholders – students, parents, school officials and teachers, and the Ontario Ministry of Education.

This series is an initiative of the Southern Ontario Social Economy Community University Research Alliance



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In Short: Some Corrections Could Improve Results

The Ontario program needs to acknowledge that many students enter high school with prior experience, and that volunteering alone does not make young people more engaged citizens.

A high school program with mandated community service should help students with prior volunteering experience grasp: (a) the importance of what they have done to date and (b) how they can build on their previous experiences to do more good for the community and their own development. The current program assumes students can figure this out for themselves. Integrating the program more formally into the curriculum, perhaps through required courses, is needed to ensure that they understand their prior achievements.

Furthermore, to be effective, the high school community service experience should be both satisfying and enjoyable. Therefore, high schools and their boards must become involved with helping students find suitable and satisfying placements.

However, all students cannot be treated the same:

* The students who will benefit most from integrating the program into the curriculum will likely be the 49% who volunteer far beyond the 40-hour requirement. They have such a strong pre-existing sense of civic responsibility that discussion of the value of community service will likely strengthen their initial attitudes.

In the most favourable group, students volunteer because it's natural and part of their personality or lifestyle. They volunteer now and make no “defensive” comments suggesting they perceive costs associated with volunteering.

*The students who may have the greatest potential to be changed by integrating the program into the curriculum are the 36% who do a little more than the required hours. Instruction may help build the sense of moral obligation toward others that they gained prior to high school. They will also benefit from placement assistance to find interesting and meaningful service opportunities.

* The students least positively impacted by the current program are the 15% of high school students who do only the required 40 hours. For this group, improving their sense of civic responsibility and willingness to participate in community service may require not only making the current program more structured and supportive, but also changing some aspect of their lives prior to high school. This could be accomplished, for example, by introducing community service courses earlier, in grade school, rather than waiting until high school. Governments could also encourage more employers to require their employees to participate in volunteer activities, possibly with their families.

To Find Out More

http://socialeconomy.utoronto.ca/english/project_pages/project_23.php