Service Learning Enhances Student Maturation and Life

Jeffrey Pittman

Regent University

Rebecca Frawley

LaTrelle Jackson

Wright State University

Abstract

Traditional-aged college students today appear to lack the personal maturity and focus on development as citizens that was seen in previous generations. Since the purposes of higher education include not only helping to prepare students for the workplace, but also helping them develop holistically as mature adults, faculty at all types of colleges and universities should give serious consideration to making service-learning one of their essential pedagogical strategies. This article presents a framework upon which a higher education institution could build a shared rationale for use of service-learning to achieve the cognitive, affective, and even spiritual development outcomes it has identified for its students. Significant Biblical support for use of service learning is also provided.

Key words: citizen; maturity; service learning; spiritual; student development

College and College Students Are Not What They Used to Be

In the post-World War II era, the 1950's and early '60's, college students were for the most part sanguine, purposeful, focused, and relatively speaking more mature than their chronological ages (Ravitch, 1983). After all, these students had either personally experienced the ravages of a world war or were the children of those who had lived through this harrowing time period. As the decades elapsed and society changed, so too have the perspectives and life preparedness of traditional-aged college students—the 18 - 24 year olds. According to historian Christopher Loss, as cited in Arum and Roksa (2014), "personality and the belief in pliable selfhood eclipsed character as the 'chief purpose of college education'" (pp. 8-9). Higher education, and society more broadly, shifted from students recognizing their individual responsibility and becoming good citizens to adopting a more "it's all about me" viewpoint on learning and educational development. Today, we frequently observe college students who possess high self-esteem, but lack

age appropriate life experience and personal maturity (Arum & Roksa, 2014; Pittman & Jackson, 2014). What we often see now are young adults who are physically and chronologically adults, but who do not possess the self-determination or life experience and skills to fully function as mature adults. Whether this change in young adult preparedness is due to less than effective parenting, inadequate K-12 education, recent economic downturns, the COVID-19 pandemic, and/or other contributing societal changes, the maturity level of the noted generation's young adults is not what it used to be (Arum & Roksa, 2014; Pittman & Jackson, 2014). Today's young adults are generally inquisitive, creative, and extremely confident in their own abilities, they need to bolster these strengths with appropriate support in areas of weakness. Perhaps moral development, age appropriate experiences and skill development, and critical thinking need to be further integrated into the educational system in order to better equip young people for adulthood. While those entrusted to govern our educational systems have taken notice that our youth is not as prepared as they should be and stepped up to require skill development for successful living (e.g.,

Florida Governor DeSantis signed Senate Bill 1054 requiring financial literacy classes for graduation), there is still more we can do (Shadd, 2022). This legislation is but one example illustrating the necessity of helping today's secondary students and young adults to garner needed practical skills. In addition to formal classroom education and parental involvement in the educational process, service learning is a potentially valuable resource to aid student development and ultimately appropriate maturation.

Service-Learning

For those unfamiliar with service learning as an educational approach, it is a means to provide knowledge and skills in an experiential setting. According to Farber (2011), service learning is:

> a learning tool to empower students to solve problems in their own communities, or even globally. It is a student-driven process, where students learn about a particular issue, place, or problem, then figure out how to take action in a positive way… Students themselves (with teacher guidance) do research, make calls, write letters, and solve problems. Ultimately, they share this process with their schools, families, and communities, and that is where the real change happens. (p. 5)

With the developmental issues faced by traditional aged college students and the rise of emotional and psychological issues, other approaches beyond classroom instruction are needed (Pittman & Jackson, 2014, p. 178). What impact can service learning opportunities provide to students beyond traditional reading and classroom instruction?

The Value and Benefits of Service-Learning

Introducing students to service learning activities opens a broad array of opportunities for personal and life skill development, career exploration, a look into other cultures and worldviews, and critical self-reflection. In addition, faith-based institutions of higher education can use service-learning very effectively to achieve spiritual formation outcomes. Helping students to mature appropriately and develop personal and professional life skills to allow them to flourish in the years ahead is a complex and lofty goal, but one which service learning can dramatically impact.

While service learning initiatives have undeniable value for impacting the growth and development of college students, it is critically important to shape learning experiences that are age-appropriate. Developmentally-appropriate service learning training takes into account a) cognitive implications, b) the role of transferable skills, and
c) the impact of self-reflection as a tool to foster greater self-awareness. By anchoring experiences in this paradigm, higher education professionals target whole person development for a lasting impact.

Cognitive Implications

As noted earlier, the modern-day college student has emerged as a complex, unique, and differently-equipped learner. The complexity embodies the perception of gaining legal status as an adult, while the traditional college-age student actually falls in the category of 'later adolescence' on the developmental spectrum (18-24 years old). Frontal lobe development has not fully matured yet, which impacts rational abilities. According to Newman and Newman (2003), the challenges of this age are multi-layered in having to navigate autonomy from parents, the impact of leaving home, the process of engaging in a college experience, and the shift to self-sufficiency. These processes can be more or less difficult depending on the level of maturity, emotional intelligence the student possesses, and their economic situation (Hill & Redding, 2021; Mineo, 2021).

Although considered legal adults at 21 years old, college students cognitively function as adolescents and participate in a whole new system when becoming members of a campus community. Indeed, for many students, the period of undergraduate study is a formative transition process moving individuals from adolescence to adulthood. It can be a wonderful experience to embrace the freedom associated with going to college. Conversely, it can be overwhelming when faced with difficult choices without the parental support of being at home or having a strong developmental or spiritual framework for moral decisions. How one perceives choice dilemmas contributes to what options are selected to address them. Depending on beliefs about substance/alcohol use, intimate relations, seeking help for psychological issues, and academic preparedness, college students may or may not reach out for assistance during this important time of transition (Soet & Sevig, 2006).

The uniqueness of modern-day college students is unprecedented. Historically, moving away from home for the college experience was a symbol of independence. However, independence is not as easy to achieve for the 18-24 year old group as it was in the past.

Newman and Newman (2003) note that before 1960, marriage was the most prevalent reason for young people moving to a new residence, other than leaving temporarily for college or the military. Since the late 1970's, marriage rates have declined

substantially (i.e., greater than 78% of those 20-24 have never been married) and co-habitation with others (i.e. roommates and intimate partners) has increased (Fields & Casper, 2001). The new generation of college students often move away from home, retain ongoing financial support from parents, cohabitate with others while matriculating, and return home after graduation. The goal of securing a college education to gain independence may be deferred or adversely impacted by economic demands, changing social norms regarding the acceptance of cohabitation prior to marriage, and job placement. Increasingly, parents and higher education professionals are updating their perspective of what support is needed to advance students to a place of well-rounded, self- sufficiency (Hartwell-Walker, 2016).

Further, this group is unique in the sense of their level of exposure to moral issues. The mindset of those born after 1990 includes modern conveniences (microwaves, cellular phones, flat screen televisions, texting, social media), ever- present war (ongoing civil disturbance in various areas of the world), and changing social mores (transgender/bi- sexuality, marriage equality legislation, and sexual abuse/trauma). Through media forums, such as reality television shows, people have had exposure to a variety of alternative lifestyles and practices. This unfiltered access fosters the expectation of immediate gratification, stimulating entertainment, and inclusion/acceptance. People can be apprised via media venues, but not truly connected. There is social distance with close access. These challenging issues would be easier to process if the moral judgment/critical thinking development center of the brain was developed. However, it is not fully developed until after later adolescence (age 24 and beyond). Further, recent research suggests a receding trend for physical and psychological maturity (Hochberg and Konner, 2020).

Lastly, contemporary college students are differently-equipped than their predecessors. Never before have incoming freshman been so astute in technology and social media applications. We have become a culture that relies on Facebook, Twitter, Google, Skype, and texting to connect. Styles of communication and teaching strategies have been modified to reach modern students in the place where they operate optimally – via technology based devices (smartphones, laptops, tablets, and computers), which can positively impact student outcomes (Vedder, 2015). However, young adults'

advances in this dimension outpaced those in other areas, such as fundamental assessment skills (common sense), character/value development, sense of collective community, and self-in- relation-to-others awareness. Incoming students have higher SAT scores than in years past, but have lower abilities to think through novel situations or realize their actions have impact on others.

For this reason, it is important to take a strength-based approach to considering this new generation. By encouraging the development of life skills via service learning opportunities, college students can be resourced to function at phenomenal levels. Service learning opportunities, in essence, serve as a strategy to support and strengthen the moral compass necessary for compassionate, ethical, servant-leadership maturation to occur.

Transferable Skills

For service learning activities to have lasting value, they must be transferable to the broader spectrum of life for cross-application. While a student may enjoy a community service project or taking part in a social advocacy event, he or she must connect with both the purpose and impact of his or her service. The purpose should be clear (who will be served) and measurable (how will I know I've been successful in achieving the goal). Further, clarity regarding how each individual contribution influences the collective effort conveys a sense of personal valence. Once these areas are addressed, the student is equipped to use the developed skill set in other areas for positive impact. Students who repeat contributions of this kind develop mastery in serving and recognizing the skill in others—thus, enhancing the scope and breadth of success.

Shape service-learning experiences to be 1) time limited (a semester or academic year time frame), 2) specific to a population (fosters engagement and makes the experience 'real'), and 3) reflective (enhances transferability of information gleaned in the process). To maximize the potential benefit, service learning experiences have added value when students see them as personally relevant (i.e., specifically, how will this experience influence my growth?), and have the opportunity to process key aspects of the experience. Being able to unpack the emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physical impact with a mentor/instructor deepens the experience and crystallizes shifts in understanding. Students are then empowered to own their contributions, feel a sense of human connectedness,

and share the value of the service learning experience with others. This transcendence of knowledge can take shape in effecting future experiences or inspiring the experiences of others.

Self - Awareness

Generally-speaking, the world has become more inwardly- focused. Self-absorption has taken shape in the form of 'selfies' (pictures taken of oneself), language/music ('it's all about me'), and an exaggerated sense of competence (inflated academic self-ratings). Gone are the days when people naturally considered others' welfare (i.e., 'I am my brother's keeper') before their own. Understanding that we now live in a narcissistic age, it is even more important to create venues for students to learn how to explore others' perspectives and refrain from personal biases regarding 'truth'. Teaching reflection as part of a service learning framework leads to greater self-awareness, increased personal effectiveness and growth, and increased awareness of the issues affecting other people (Cotton & Thompson, 2017; Mann & DeAngelo, 2016; Lawson & Firestone, 2018). These objectives are often accomplished in diversity courses that address attitudes, skills, and knowledge assessment as a means for mapping personal growth. However, service learning experiences can also utilize this model to effectively advance college student maturation, openness to experience, and skill development (Alston et al., 2016). The endgame is for the student to cultivate critical thinking skills, use multiple intelligences, incorporate real world issues as part of education, promote equity, foster appreciation for cultural diversity, and promote positive changes in school culture (Beatty et al., 2016; Campbell & Oswald, 2018). However, there are additional benefits. Service learning improves student civic attitudes, faculty engagement in the teaching process, and greater connection within communities (Smith et al., 2019).

Building Greater Empathy and Enhanced Spiritual Formation

As noted in Frawley (2013), the mission statements of most religious colleges and universities include an explicit reference to "service" (Bucco & Busch, 1996, p. 231; Heffner & Beversluis, 2002, p. xxix; Schaffer, 2004, p. 134). So, should the faculty and academic administrators of these institutions seriously consider committing themselves to service-learning as a core strategy to accomplish those service-oriented missions? There are at least two theological reasons for them to do so. The biblical theology of the Kingdom of God adds value to the philosophical framework of service-learning as education

for citizenship and personal development, and the Christian conception of knowledge based in revelation enhances service-learning's pedagogical framework of reflection. Thus, community-based service-learning is well- suited to help Christian colleges and universities fulfill their unique calling to offer faith-based higher education.

First, while non-religious colleges may use service-learning to cultivate a commitment to civic engagement out of

social or moral duty, Christian institutions can provide students an additional, deeper inspiration for learning to serve well. The process would be based in an understanding of service as a privilege of God's people and a means of thanksgiving and worship, requiring dependence on the leading of God's Spirit—ultimately bringing Him the honor for the good works. The understanding of citizenship in God's kingdom as a high calling to be its agents and ambassadors in the world inspires a Christian academic community to learn how to serve this kingdom most intelligently (Dockery, 1999, p. 9; Plantinga, 2002, p. 107). As Holmes (1975) states:

> Because God's kingdom of shalom is already among us and yet to come in its fullness, [Christian] education will concern itself with matters of justice, peace, and love in this world, so as to help produce responsible agents rather than mere spectators on the events and social evils of our times. (p. 102)

Wolterstorff (as cited in Heffner & Beversluis, 2002) urged Christian colleges to "build bridges from theory to practice," because "the goal is not just to understand the world but to change it . . . to equip and motivate students for a Christian way of being and acting in the world" (p. xxv). Moreover, Roso (2014) suggested, "Doing does impact being—what we do shapes what we think and who we become" (final para.). Thus, Christian educators should consider using service-learning not just to prepare students to actively engage in their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society. They should also realize that service- learning can elevate the educational process to another level as individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, virtues, and passion needed, as citizens of God's kingdom, to play a meaningful role in His restorative work within individuals, societies, and the natural world (Hamilton & Kulaga, 2004, p. 248; Heffner & Beversluis, 2002, pp. x, xxvi).

Second, the reflective component that makes service-learning such an effective pedagogical method can also support the efforts of Christian educators to help students personally embrace the reflective spiritual

practices of meditation on Scripture, repentance, and prayer. Holmes (1975) declared, "It is counterproductive educationally to sponsor activities, even Christian service activities, in which the student relapses into unreflective ways, or reflects without the scrutiny of a properly equipped mentor" (p. 96). Another key purpose of Christian education is to help students develop the ability to understand the subtle, complex effects of "the fall" on all aspects of the world (Ostrander, 2009, pp. 66, 68), enabling the development of effective solutions to those problems. Well-designed service learning in a Christian context provide faculty and students the opportunity to explore, discover, and measure

what they are experiencing and observing against the standard of God's revealed truth in an effort to come to a unified Christ-centered understanding of the situation and to creatively apply that truth to the needs at hand (Litfin, 2004, p. 205; Plantinga, 2002, p. 99; Roso, 2014, final para.). If used intentionally, service-learning can become the springboard between the higher learning process and students' increasing transformation into embodying Christ- like attitudes and behaviors.

Advancing Pedagogy Along with Christian Worldview

The fallenness of creation extends into the thinking and learning processes of human beings (Litfin, 2004, p. 203; Plantinga, 2002, p. 66). So, it is critical for students to be led to examine their beliefs and assumptions and to labor to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5, New American Standard version). Litfin (2004) stated, "As an essential element in our service to God our thinking is not to be conformed to the world—that is, shaped merely by our cultural moment—but we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2)" (p. 204).

As Schaffer (2004) observed, "Service-learning challenges students to consider what they believe as they confront situations and people who may question their motives or beliefs," and he asserted that such challenges foster spiritual growth (pp. 135-136). Redemption-oriented service-learning provides a safe venue, with a wise faculty guide, for students to examine themselves as they apply course content—to ask God to reveal any "hurtful ways in them" (Psalm 139:23-24), such as impatience, pride in the way they hold their beliefs, tendencies toward simplistic, black-and-white thinking, or prejudicial stereotyping. Students must be led to understand that because of God's common grace, they should expect to learn valuable things about caring for the needs of the world from the insights of non-Christians, seeking, as Ostrander (2009) stated, "to understand those ideas from within a larger

Christian framework" (p. 56, 71; Litfin, 2004, p. 77; Plantinga, 2002,
p. 112).

Learning to Listen and to Thoughtfully Contemplate

Dockery (2008) urged that if fruitful interactions with unbelievers are going to take place, faculty must help students understand that "before we can articulate the truths of God's kingdom, it is important that we learn to listen"—that we value what others bring to the working relationship (p. 147; Plantinga, 2002, p. 117). As they reflect on their emotional responses to new situations, students have the opportunity to "lay aside the old self" that conforms with unbiblical thinking and to ask God to
help them "put on the new self" that conforms with Christ's true perspective and way of responding to the needs of the world (Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-10). As Kulaga (2004) suggested, "We will then find that thinking with the mind of Christ will result in loving with the heart of Christ and acting as the hands of Christ" (p. 55).

A well-designed service learning experience should have clearly-defined learning outcomes, direct involvement of community partners, meaningful student engagement, multiple means of reflection on the experience, and assessment of student learning (Welch, 2010, p. 76). The following examples of reflection prompts specifically require students to integrate their growing faith into the process of seeking to connect course content with their experiences in service:

- Why is your service work needed? What is the problem or issue you are helping to address? What caused it? Why should a Christian care about this issue?
- What is the experience pointing out to you about your own attitudes, biases or preferences? Can you think of any Scriptures that would help you evaluate whether any of those attitudes need to change?
- Assess how effective you've been in this experience. What behaviors (both verbal and nonverbal) improved or lessened your effectiveness? What role did your faith play in your actions and responses?
- How have your assumptions, stereotypes, and expectations changed as a result of the service experience?
- What are some possible solutions to the natural, social, moral, political, or spiritual issues revealed through the service

experience?

- How does the combination of course materials and your work in the community relate to your personal and professional calling? How does it affect your understanding of the community and your role in it as a citizen and as a follower of Christ?

Faculty can learn to engage in the perhaps less familiar use of rubrics for qualitative content analysis of written reflection activities to help them assess the extent of students' affective growth and development of critical thinking skills. Many colleges and service-learning organizations post sample rubrics for others to use or adapt. In addition, the instructor can conduct both formative and summative evaluations to capture student needs and feedback regarding intrapersonal changes.

Formative feedback occurs while the service learning experience is still in process—fostering greater student engagement and the flexibility to modify the experiences as needed. Summative evaluation occurs at the end of the course providing students an opportunity to report their perceptions of how well the service-learning component of the course helped them to learn and grow personally and spiritually, as well as to contribute to the achievement of the community partner's goals.

Conclusion

Jesus told His disciples that the kingdom of God is like leaven, quietly working its way throughout the dough (Matthew 13:33). As students learn to integrate God's truth with course content and apply it through community- service experiences and see that truth positively affecting social and natural systems, they can experience a hope for their vocation to truly help spread God's kingdom of wholeness in every place they live and labor. They can also experience the joy of learning to serve, as people with dual citizenship, in ways that bring glory to God (Matthew 5:16), knowing that He is the One equipping them "in every good work to do His will, working in [them] that which is pleasing in His sight" (Hebrews 13:21). Clearly, since such outcomes are at the heart of the mission of every Christian higher education institution, these academic communities are encouraged to give strong consideration to making service- learning one of their common pedagogical strategies.

Service-learning initiatives can enhance pedagogy in numerous disciplines to help students better understand and apply the course materials they read and study. This instructional strategy can thereby expand the impact of course material and an individual professor's perspectives

to a broader view of the world, people, and societal needs. Obtaining even a glimmer of God's view of people and their needs through practical experiences can enhance critical thinking and, more importantly, open the doorway for significant personal spiritual maturation. Isn't this critical goal a core principal of most Christian higher learning institutions?

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Author Information
Jeffrey Pittman
Regent University
jeffpit@regent.edu

Rebecca Frawley
xpriston@aol.com

LaTrelle Jackson
Wright University
Latrelle.jackson@wright.edu