Service-Learning in the First Year Experience
Findings from the Bringing Theory to Practice Grant Assessment Project
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Our assessment goals focused on two key questions: Do the faculty have the knowledge and support necessary to incorporate service learning into their courses? Does the incorporation of service learning have positive impacts on our students?

In Fall 2007, the project team developed relevant instruments for data collection. Scribner Seminar faculty members were surveyed to explore any barriers they experienced to incorporate service learning (SL) in the classroom. During Fall 2008, nine faculty members incorporated service learning into their FYE seminar curricula. Students in a comparison group of eleven Scribner Seminars were surveyed, comparing outcomes between those in SL and non-SL seminars.

In addition, Skidmore currently conducts annual evaluations designed to assess student health and wellness. Topic areas include alcohol and drug use/abuse, mental health, nutrition, disordered eating, sexual assault, sexual behaviors, and others. During Fall 2008, the project team added items to the Alcohol and Other Drug Survey to help identify respondents enrolled in SL and non-SL seminars. Unfortunately, of the 550 students that responded to this survey, only 131 were first year students and 23 were participants in a service-learning seminar. Thus, the sample size for this subgroup was too small to conduct meaningful analyses comparing their AOD use with other students.

Faculty Survey
We conducted an online survey in November, 2007, for Fall 2008 Scribner Seminar faculty. Of the 47 faculty slated to teach Scribner Seminars, we received 27 responses (after three follow-up requests to complete the survey) yielding a 57% response rate. Below are the key findings from this survey:
- 63% of the faculty was "somewhat" **familiar** with service learning, meaning that there is much room for faculty education
- 53% believed service learning might be **relevant** to their first year seminar
- 67% thought they could use **assistance** identifying relevant service opportunities in the community
- 75% expressed at least some willingness to **attend a worksho**p to learn more about service learning
- 19% were likely to **add service learning** to their Fall 08 seminar, 37% were in the "maybe" or "not sure" categories, and 44% were not going to add it
- When asked about what might work as **incentives** to add service learning, we learned that:
    - The strongest incentive would be time, such as a **course release** (42% thought this was a "great incentive")
    - When combining what faculty believed to be either "mild" or "great" incentives, four incentives stood out:
        - Evidence of positive outcomes for students (67%)

- Logistical support from the Office of Community Service Programs (63%)
- Course development support, e.g., $500-1,000 (59%)
- Evidence of student interest (59%)

Student Surveys

Scribner Seminars are required for Skidmore students in the first semester of their freshmen year. In 2008, 48 seminars were taught. Nine seminars included service learning. Pre- and post-semester surveys were administered online to all enrolled students in these SL seminars. In addition, students were surveyed in 11 non-service learning seminars selected as a comparison group (originally, one of the non-SL seminar faculty planned to incorporated service learning, but did not do so and was included in the non-SL comparison group). The sample included 20 seminars, with 270 students enrolled. The pre-semester survey received 148 responses, a 55% response rate. The post-semester survey included 168 responses, a 62% response rate. In total, 210 students participated in at least one of the surveys, a 78% response rate. 109 students completed both surveys, a 40% response rate.

Results reported in Table 1 compare the student respondents in SL and non-SL seminars. Of these eight items, only one shows a statistically significant difference: the amount of hours spent participating in service work for the Scribner Seminar. As predicted, the SL seminars can be distinguished from the comparison group by this criterion. But on all other items, they cannot be distinguished. This shows that the students are not dissimilar and that findings regarding learning outcomes cannot be attributed to a selection bias among students. In both groups, for example, approximately half of the students were required to participate in community service during high school. Also notable in the results, students spent equivalent amounts of time studying in their SL and non-SL seminars, and for their other coursework.

Table 1. Comparisons between SL and non-SL seminars (bold items, p<.05).

	Service Learning	Not Service Learning
Pre-semester survey	N=53	N=97
1. Did your high school require community service for graduation?	Yes 50% (n=26)	Yes 46% (n=44)
2. Have you done any volunteering/community service during this past summer?	Yes 44% (n=23)	Yes 40% (n=38)
3. Do you plan on engaging in community service/volunteering during the upcoming academic year?	Yes 95% (n=35)	Yes 91% (n=50)
4. How important were community service/volunteering opportunities in your decision to attend Skidmore? (4 point scale from not important to highly)	2.06	1.88
Post-semester survey: Hours spent on activity (5 point scale from no hours to >10/week)	N=70	N=97
1. Hours studying for your Scribner Seminar:	2.90	2.81
2. Hours studying for all classes combined (including Scribner Seminar):	4.31	4.47
3. Community service for your Scribner Seminar:	**2.40**	**1.10**
4. Community service not for your Scribner Seminar:	1.55	1.48

Several items were included in both pre- and post-semester surveys, so that change over the course of the semester could be measured. The results of these data are found in Table 2. Mean scores of students in SL and non-SL seminars are compared. Most items do not demonstrate statistically significant differences. However, items in bold denote such findings. Only respondents who completed both pre- and post-semester surveys were included in this analysis.

Only one item (of ten) in the first set revealed statistically significant differences. These items asked students to compare themselves to their peers. The mean score for "respecting the views of others" did not change for SL students, but declined for non-SL students. The second set of items asked students to respond to how well each item described them. Of seven items, two showed significant differences. For the item, "I often discuss political or social issues with my friends," a positive change was found for non-SL students. SL students showed decline for the item, "I usually make up my mind about something quickly."

More variation was found in the last set of items, measuring student attitudes on a Likert scale of agreement. Three items revealed negative findings, meaning they showed declines when we might hope for positive improvement. At the end of the semester, non-SL students were less likely to agree that "adults should give time for the good of the community." Both SL and non-SL students were less likely to agree with two items: "I feel I can have an impact on solving the problems in my community" and "It is important to me to volunteer my time to help people in need."

Comparing post-semester outcomes, non-SL students were more likely to agree that "social problems are not my concern" than SL students. They were also more likely to agree that "I feel uncomfortable working with people who are different than me in things such as race, wealth and life experience." These may be positive effects of participation in service learning.

In sum, these are somewhat puzzling and contradictory findings. We may not want to put too much stock in these items for three reasons. First, the sample of students that completed both pre- and post-semester surveys was relatively small—109 students (40% response rate). Second, detecting change over a four month period is inherently challenging, and would probably require more nuanced assessment strategies than those undertaken here. Finally, self-reported changes may be especially complex during the transition to college. Students might, for example, maintain a naïve and overly optimistic view of themselves at the point of entry. But then, despite real growth in knowledge and skills, may report less confidence at the semester's end because they have been surrounding by a new, more competitive reference group and many new challenges.

Table 2. Pre-Semester/Post-Semester Student Survey Results (bold items p<.05).

	Service Learning (n=41)		Not Service Learning (n=68)	
	Pre-Semester Mean	Post-Semester Mean	Pre-Semester Mean	Post-Semester Mean
How well you do compared to your peers (5 point scale from much worse to much better):				
1. Respecting the views of others	3.83	3.80	**3.96**	**3.71**
2. Thinking critically	3.49	3.76	3.65	3.60
3. Ability to listen	3.73	3.73	3.97	3.82
4. Ability to compromise	3.71	3.61	3.72	3.53
5. Being effective in accomplishing goals	3.44	3.63	3.57	3.53
6. Ability to work with others	3.61	3.51	3.53	3.50
7. Thinking about others before myself	3.54	3.66	3.52	3.50
8. Ability to write	3.39	3.49	3.51	3.61
9. Ability to speak in public	3.07	3.17	3.06	3.25
10. Ability to lead a group	3.20	3.40	3.47	3.41
The degree to which they describe you (4 point scale from not well to very well):				
1. I often discuss political or social issues with my friends.	3.10	3.27	**2.79**	**3.03**
2. I sometimes have a hard time seeing things from the other person's point of view.	2.27	2.07	2.21	2.13
3. I usually make up my mind about something quickly.	**2.68**	**2.38**	2.57	2.60
4. I read the newspaper (electronic or paper) daily.	2.49	2.51	2.31	2.41
5. I watch news shows daily.	2.33	2.18	2.12	1.95
6. I often try to persuade others to my point of view.	2.80	2.71	2.66	2.72
7. I usually take a long time to consider things before I make up my mind.	3.05	3.05	3.09	3.06
Level of agreement (4 point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree):				
1. Adults should give time for the good of the community.	4.10	3.76	**4.12**	**3.74**
2. Social problems are not my concern.	**1.73**	*1.34*	1.50	*1.46*
3. People who receive social services only have themselves to blame for needing such services.	1.61	1.51	1.51	1.48
4. I feel I can have an impact on solving the problems in my community.	**4.15**	**3.41**	**3.91**	**3.26**
5. It is important to me to volunteer my time to help people in need.	**4.24**	**3.54**	**4.05**	**3.41**
6. I feel uncomfortable working with people who are different than me in things such as race, wealth and life experience.	1.44	*1.34*	1.56	*1.62*

Table 3. End-of-Semester Student Survey Results (bold items p<.05).

	Service Learning (n=72)	Not Service Learning (n=97)
	Mean	Mean
Self-reported growth due to seminar (5 point scale from no growth to great deal):		
1. Comprehending, analyzing and interpreting texts	**3.89**	**3.21**
2. Speaking in a small or large group setting	**3.68**	**3.16**
3. Expressing ideas, opinions, facts in writing	**3.85**	**3.44**
4. Analyzing complex issues to make informed decisions	**4.01**	**3.27**
5. Changing approach to a problem based on the situation	**3.68**	**3.17**
6. Understanding values of people different from you	3.78	3.61
7. Keeping your composure when dealing with conflict	**3.51**	**2.93**
8. Solving quantitative problems (using math, statistics, etc.)	**2.04**	**1.49**
Level of agreement (4 point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree):		
1. I frequently spoke with my instructor outside of the classroom.	**3.32**	**2.97**
2. I was very actively involved as a learner in this class.	**3.68**	**3.43**
3. Outside of class time, I frequently thought about the issues raised in class.	**3.58**	**3.32**
4. This class provided me with useful skills and knowledge.	**3.75**	**3.36**
5. This class frequently caused me to think about my own attitudes, values, and perspectives.	**3.62**	**3.39**
6. This class has helped with my decision-making about a major and/or future career.	**2.90**	**2.37**
7. The student friendships I developed through this class are intellectually stimulating.	3.35	3.17
8. Because of this class, I will be more likely to keep going to college at Skidmore.	**3.27**	**2.85**
9. This class caused me to feel more concern about social problems in the local and/or global community.	**3.48**	**3.15**
10. This class has increased my interest in participating in community service/volunteer activities.	**3.12**	**2.13**

Table 3 explores post-semester responses of service-learning and non-SL students. Here we find more compelling evidence that service learning has a positive impact on civic and academic attitudes. The findings report end-of-semester attitudes on seventeen items. These items were included only in the post-semester survey and measure attitudes about their Scribner Seminar experience. In every case, service-learning students report higher levels of learning and engagement than non service-learning students. While most items (14/17) are statistically significant, a clear pattern emerges with all of the items. This is apparent for learning outcomes that are directly related to civic responsibility, such as "This class caused me to feel more concern about social problems in the local and/or global community." It is apparent for traditional liberal learning outcomes, such as "Comprehending, analyzing and interpreting texts" and "Solving quantitative problems (using math, statistics, etc.)." And it is apparent for student engagement outcomes, such as "I was very actively involved as a learner in this class" and "Outside of class time, I frequently thought about the issues raised in class." Finally, service-learning students reported greater commitment to Skidmore and that their seminars were more helpful to their consideration of a major and a career path. In sum, these data provide intriguing evidence of the positive effect of service learning, and contribute local data to a broad set of national findings that endorse the pedagogical power of service learning.