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## Vocational Exploration through Service: The Effect of Service-Learning on Student Understanding of God's Calling

*COLLEGE IS A TIME of exploration for students. College students who are Christian may also engage in exploration of God's call on their lives, a discernment of their vocation. One pedagogical technique that can help us help students explore vocation is service-learning. To better understand their vocation, students need to understand themselves and fit that with what the world needs (Buechner, 1992). Research on service-learning suggests that both identity and knowledge of the world are expanded through service-learning experiences.*

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In 2000 the Lilly Endowment Inc. granted the first in a set of grants to colleges and universities in the US to engage in what the endowment called a theological exploration of vocation with their students. Schools worked hard to develop a variety of programs and experiences to fit their students and campus culture (see <http://www.ptev.org> for a sampling). One possibility in helping students explore vocation is implementing or strengthening service-learning programs. Service-learning sounds like a good idea, but what do we know about the effect it has on students? How are students changed by these types of experiences?

To begin we need to start with the question of what vocation is. Buechner (1992) writes:

The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you most need to do and (b) the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either. . . . The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. (p. 185)

This suggests two main foci as we walk with students on their vocational journey. We need to help students discover their own deep gladness. What are they good

at? What excites them? Who are they? We also need to help students understand the world's deep hunger. Where are people hurting? Where is environmental, social, economic, or cultural devastation happening? The focus of this paper is on how service-learning influences the vocational journey of students. How might service-learning help students better understand their own deep gladness and the world's deep hunger?

## Defining Service-Learning

Before discussing its impact on students, we must start with a definition of service-learning. Howard (1998) defines service-learning as “a pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant community service” (p. 22). The way that this plays out with a particular course or for a particular project may vary. Sigmon (1996) differentiates various forms of service-learning depending on where the focus was placed. For service-learning that makes learning goals primary and service more of a secondary add-on to the learning, he uses the term *service-LEARNING*. For instances where the opposite is true—service is primary and learning goals secondary—he uses the term *SERVICE-learning*. Students may experience this type of situation when they do extensive service, for example on some study-abroad trips or in internships, but then have only minimal debriefing or discussion of how this connects to the ideas and concepts they have learned. At times, volunteering at a college or university may have separate service and learning goals; for this, Sigmon took out the hyphen and used the term *service learning*. Instances where service and learning are well integrated are *SERVICE-LEARNING*. A course that requires service and incorporates that service into the goals and day-to-day workings of the course is an example of this type of service-learning.

The paragraph above provides just a taste of the diversity that exists in what qualifies as service-learning (Kraft, 1996). Scholars disagree on how service-learning should be defined and on what qualifies as service-learning. Research on service-learning is also quite diverse. Research reports range from interviews done with as few as eight students (Jones & Abes, 2004) to large, national studies. One of the more extensive studies of service-learning was done by Eyler and Giles (1999). They conducted a national study of service-learning using two methods. They recruited fifteen hundred college students from more than twenty institutions to complete surveys at the beginning and the end of a semester of service-learning. They also completed in-depth interviews with sixty-six students from seven institutions at the beginning and end of a semester of service-learning and one-time interviews with sixty-seven students from six colleges and universities. This type of national study allows us to better understand how service-learning affects students across institutions, communities, and geographic regions.

## Identity

With that introduction we can return to the question of the impact of service-learning on vocational understanding, beginning with the question of identity development. Students need to understand themselves in order to understand

where their gifts and passions can best serve the world. Do service-learning experiences help student understand their “deep gladness”?

Students tend to report that service-learning experiences help them learn about themselves. When students answered open-ended questions in Eyler and Giles’s (1999) study, the researchers found that a large proportion of the responses to the question “What did you learn from service-learning?” involved personal and interpersonal development. Meeting new people different from themselves, particularly those they never would have met in their daily lives, is something students mentioned “as a catalyst for their growth and change” (p. 25). Positive growth and change is best accomplished by pairing such meetings with critical reflection involving others (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kraft, 1996).

The impact of these experiences is maintained over time. Jones and Abes (2004) conducted in-depth interviews with participants in a service-learning course two to four years after their service. These individuals reported that the service-learning experiences forced them to “reflect on their values, beliefs and attitudes in a way very few other activities had encouraged” (p. 154). The researchers found that these individuals reported living their lives differently because of their service-learning experiences. They had made particular career choices because of service-learning, and the experience opened them up to possibilities they had not considered before, helping them to clarify their goals and to put those goals into perspective. This study had a low sample size and may be biased toward those with positive experiences with service-learning, so we must question whether such changes are true for all students who experience service-learning. Nevertheless, for the individuals studied, a positive impact was evident.

The exploration of identity that service-learning experiences provide is important to students. In Eyler and Giles’s (1999) study 78% of students rated knowledge of themselves as one of the most important or a very important outcome of service-learning. Students may seek out these experiences to better understand themselves. One student participated in a week-long project and said, “I’m kind of in a search for my own identity, and this trip is part of that search. I just don’t know quite who I am yet. I’m struggling to figure it out. These kinds of experiences help” (Rhoads, 1998, p. 286). In light of Eyler and Giles’s (1999) findings and the comment from this and others students in the Rhoads (1998) study, it is likely that students who are exploring their identity may seek out courses that include service-learning.

For Christians, service allows us not just to learn about ourselves as individuals but also to be reminded of our place within the community and our identity as Christ-followers. Jesus called us to serve one another and showed us how to do this by example. As one proponent of service-learning wrote: “A Christian perspective on service-learning is consistent with Christ’s example, calls us to serve the poor and society in general, and sets the goal not at becoming better citizens but rather at fulfilling who we were created to become—loving servants who by giving, receive” (Ver Beek, 2002, p. 58). Our identity in Christ should be one of service and come out of our identity.

The college years are an ideal time in which to focus on the change service-learning can have on identity development. Traditionally, developmental psychol-

ogists have identified the teen years as the time of identity exploration (Erikson, 1950, 1959, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Arnett (2006) proposes that this time period is extended into the twenties in the modern Western world because of a social structure that has delayed things that mark the beginning of adulthood, such as finishing education, marriage, and childbirth, into the mid- to late twenties. Arnett named this time period emerging adulthood, a time when individuals are no longer children or even adolescents but do not yet have the established identities of adulthood.

Understanding of vocation and identity status have been linked. Students who had explored possibilities and made a commitment to a particular identity (achieved identity status) also reported a clearer understanding of their vocation, their sense of God's calling on their lives (Feenstra & Brouwer, 2008). Service-learning is certainly not a magic bullet that suddenly shoots students from being confused or unsure of their vocation or identity to achieved identity in a week or a semester. Time is a major factor in identity development; fourth-year students usually have a better understanding of identity and vocation than first-year students (Feenstra & Brouwer, 2008; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999; Meilman, 1979; Waterman, 1985). But service-learning, particularly service-learning that is well-done, does have the ingredients that can impact identity development.

McAdams (1985; McAdams et al., 2006) argues that an important part of developing identity is developing a life story. In figuring out how to integrate various parts of the self in time and context, one develops a narrative identity. This narrative identity helps us understand, and may illustrate to others, how we make meaning out of our lives. Over time, narratives can become more complex and show more evidence of personal growth. No researchers have addressed narrative identity in relation to service-learning, but given that service-learning participants report a reduction in stereotypes (Eyler & Giles, 1999), a better understanding of their social context (a wider worldview; Milofsky & Flack, 2005), and a more nuanced and sensitive understanding of themselves and others (Cebulski, 2002; Eyler & Giles, 1999), it seems likely such a connection would be found.

Others have looked at identity exploration differently. According to one model, identity exploration begins with an orientation to engage in work toward developing identity. Grotevant (1987) suggests that the likelihood of having such an orientation is a function of personality and environment. Changes in life circumstance, such as graduation or marriage, promote identity exploration, as do environments that expose individuals to differing points of view. With an expansion of Grotevant's model Kerpelman, Pittman, and Lamke (1997) propose that exploration would be triggered by a disruption in an identity standard. Exposure to new points of view and disruption in an identity standard is evident in student writings about their service-learning experience. One student wrote that the experience of his class "has acted . . . as an eye-exam for the soul, forcing us to realize what we believe and why we believe it. And we realize that our vision was never 20/20. We leave here with a little better vision" (Pompa, 2005, p. 176).

Overall, it seems as though ingredients for growth in understanding of identity are present in service-learning. Identity formation is important for vocational

reflection. Service-learning, therefore, can be a valuable tool to assist students to better understand their own calling.

## Understanding the World

An understanding of vocation involves not only an understanding of oneself but also an understanding of the world and its needs. Most college courses include, in some way or other, increasing students' knowledge or awareness of the world and its needs. Service-learning can enhance this understanding.

In Eyler and Giles's (1999) national study of service-learning one student said:

I can honestly say that I've learned more in this last year of [service-learning] than I probably have learned in all four years of college. I have learned so much, maybe because I found something that I'm really passionate about, and it makes you care more to learn about it—and to get involved and do more. You're not just studying to take a test and forget about it. You're learning, and the experiences we have are staying with us. It's not cram for the test the night before. I know when I take a test that I just want to get it over with. That doesn't happen with service; it stays with you. We learn these theories in school and ideas, but until we really apply them or see them in action, they're not real. And we come out of school, if we haven't done something like this, not understanding. (p. 1)

These comments suggest three main ways service-learning can be helpful to students in learning about the world. First, service-learning may provide students with greater motivation to learn. Service-learning experiences have the potential to increase students' enthusiasm for what they are learning. They may become passionate about an issue. Second, service-learning allows for application of learning. Ideas and theories might be just that until they are applied to real-life situations. Although not fully explicit in this quotation, a third way service-learning could be helpful is that through service-learning students gain a greater understanding of how the world works. Before engaging in service-learning, students may have a black-and-white perspective on the world, but service-learning may help reveal the messiness of the world, forcing students to think about issues in a more nuanced fashion. As the student quoted above notes, they may come out not really understanding. I expand briefly on each of these below.

Vocation involves understanding the world, but without motivation to learn about the world, students may suffer in their vocational exploration. Service-learning can enhance student motivation. Eyler and Giles (1999) report that in their interviews, students engaged in service-learning reported that the people they met and the situations they encountered engaged them, causing them to want to know more (p. 84). One student met a homeless person, and "because she knew him, suddenly it was important to know more about his world. The barrier between an abstract issue and a three-dimensional, authentic situation that the student is part of had been broken by human contact" (p. 88). Meeting new people from diverse backgrounds and encountering real problems within the context of a

service-learning experience cuts through students' apathy and moves them toward engagement. These experiences can lead students to ask questions they might not otherwise know to ask or be motivated to find the answer to.

Vocational exploration suggests a particular kind of knowledge acquisition. In his address to representatives of schools awarded a Lilly grant to explore vocation, Senior Vice President of the Lilly Endowment Inc. Craig Dykstra (2007) said, "The territory on which the theological exploration of vocation takes place has to be broad enough, rich enough, and compelling enough to make it true to real life. There's got to be room enough for the explorer to venture out widely and deeply. And the substance of the 'world' they explore has to be full, dense and compelling enough to be worthy of their best attention" (section 3, para. 5). Application of knowledge could allow for this type of rich experience. Application of learning is a strength of service-learning. One issue in education identified early by Dewey (1938) is learning that often is very circumscribed. Students may learn a concept but will be able to apply that concept only in the same context in which it was learned and will be able to recall it only when asked using the same language used when they learned it. This static knowledge is not very helpful. When a situation occurs where the knowledge could be applied, people miss the connections and therefore fail to contribute to a solution. If we want to encourage application in various domains, being open and flexible cognitively is key (Spiro & Jehng, 1990; Spiro, Collins, & Ramachandran, 2007).

Cognitive psychologists have noted this issue as well and have suggested application of knowledge as one powerful way to move from simply knowing a fact to being able to use that fact. One side benefit of this type of application is that students not only can apply something in a variety of settings; they also tend to remember the concepts they applied better (Regehr & Norman, 1996). Service-learning is certainly not the only way to do this—Spiro, Collins, and Ramachandran (2007) propose multimedia learning systems—but it can be one powerful tool within the pedagogical toolbox.

Service-learning does help students move from static to dynamic knowledge. When Eyler and Giles (1999) asked students to define and analyze an issue communities might face, those whose service was well integrated with coursework were able to do so. This ability was not found in all students who engaged in service-learning, only in those with well-integrated experiences. It seems as though students need a great deal of help to see connections, and only with practice are they able to apply their knowledge.

As suggested by the Dykstra (2007) quote above, vocational exploration must also involve an understanding of how complex the world can be. Do service-learning experiences provide students with the type of full and dense explorations that help students understand the complexity of the world? College is a unique time of development for traditional-age students. Developmentally they often are in the process of moving from thinking of the world in terms of black and white, right and wrong, to an epistemology that allows for gray areas (King & Kitchener, 1994). One example of how an instructor attempted to help students see the gray is described by Loyd-Paige (2002). In her sociology course on diversity she requires service-learning that helps her primarily white, middle-

class, Christian students meet individuals of different races and backgrounds. She describes the process whereby her students move from a belief that race does not matter (what she describes as color-blind syndrome) to seeing that race plays a role in our lives whether we want it to or not. Being blind to it also means one is blind to inequalities and suffering that might be addressed. Similarly, in describing a service-learning experience where students join work toward reconciliation in Northern Ireland, Milofsky and Flack (2005) write that “previously comfortable assumptions are thrown into doubt, and new thinking about the self, and about the nature of social life, is often the result” (p. 169).

Eyler and Giles (1999) found systematic evidence of this complexity in their study. Students engaged in service-learning “come to accept uncertainty and complexity as the way of the world; they understand that their awareness that the more they know, the less certainty they have is a positive insight rather than a defect in themselves or society” (p. 100). A study by Batchelder and Root (1994) shows that students increased in awareness of multidimensionality. By confronting students with the complex, interconnected issues present in real-world situations, service-learning helps students form a more integrated, nuanced view of how the world works.

Eyler and Giles (1999) found that students increased in their ability to identify social issues and their openness to new ideas. Their findings with regard to critical thinking were mixed. As a whole, the participants in their studies did not increase in critical thinking over the semester. The exception to this was those students who engaged in classes where service was a central focus of the course, part of the day-to-day business of class. These students ended up at a slightly higher stage of critical thinking than those in courses with less integration of service-learning or with no service-learning (p. 124).

## Conclusion

Buechner (1992) makes it clear that vocational exploration involves both one’s deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger. Without knowing oneself and one’s identity, an understanding of vocation will be incomplete. One student who engaged in service-learning wrote that she was frustrated with all the injustice she saw, but through the experience “I was able to move past my frustration, to clarify my interests and abilities, and to imagine different ways of being and moving and speaking in this world” (Pompa, 2005, p. 189). In knowing herself better, she was able to find a way to contribute.

This self-knowledge must be paired with world knowledge. As we saw above, this knowledge must be one that acknowledges the complexity of the world. As one practitioner notes, “Awareness alone allows a person to blame the victim for their social distress without a critique of the victim’s relationship to the environment, social institutions, cultural patterns, or prevailing social forces. Awareness alone allows a student, or any other person, to neglect examining his or her own role both in the continuation of social distress and in initiating change” (Loyd-Paige, 2002, p. 126). Service-learning seems uniquely suited to address the requirements both for self-knowledge and for world knowledge in understanding of vocation.

Service-learning, when done well, is not simple or easy. If a teacher isn't daunted by initial thoughts about including service-learning, Butin's (2005) list of requirements for organizing a powerful service-learning experience would give one pause. He writes, "It takes foresight, time, organizational capabilities, creativity, networking skills, tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to cede sole control of classroom learning, and an acceptance of long-term rather than immediate increments of progress" (p. viii). He goes on to say that service-learning can be politically dangerous in institutions where traditional classroom teaching and scholarship receive the most attention and rewards. He also remarks that service-learning can be existentially dangerous. With service-learning we may need to rethink where knowledge comes from and what it is important to know. We may find, along this journey, that our own field or area of expertise has less importance in the world beyond our classroom.

Service-learning matters. When we put the evidence together concerning the effects of service-learning, we can conclude the following: 1) Service-learning impacts identity development. For college students in the midst of identity explorations, it can help move them forward and may even be sought by students. For Christian college students service-learning may remind them of their identity as Christ-followers. 2) Service-learning helps students learn more about the world and learn this in a way that motivates them to learn and allows them to see the complexity of the world and to apply their knowledge to the issues at hand. Putting these together, we conclude that service-learning contributes to our students' understanding of the call of God on their lives in a powerful way.

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