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Chapter

Working toward an Equity-Based Model for Volunteering and Service-Learning Projects in Higher Education

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Abstract

Volunteering and service-learning projects (VSLPs) in higher education have gained much praise for the educational benefits they provide students. Less attention has focused on the challenges that may accompany these types of projects, particularly for students and faculty from underrepresented communities. Analyzing previous scholarship and current case studies from both a student and professor who have first-hand experience with VSLPs at a minority-serving institution, this chapter critically examines the educational and professional challenges VSLPs may present for both students and faculty in higher education. Evidence from the case studies suggest that VSLPs may demand unrealistic, unattainable, or problematic expectations from students and faculty. The case studies also suggest that students and faculty from marginalized communities and/or precarious positions are most negatively impacted. Developing a better understanding of how and why these challenges exist may help shift our practices toward an equity-based model of VSLPs in higher education.

Keywords: volunteering, service-learning, equity, higher education, minority-serving institution

1. Introduction

Projects and assignments that require students to volunteer or complete service-learning projects have become increasingly common in colleges and universities around the world. Centered around volunteering or participating in community service, service-learning is defined as a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility,” [1]. While service-learning projects include the distinctive component of engaging students in critical thinking and reflection in connection to course learning outcomes [2], standalone volunteering projects and service-learning projects in higher education share much in common.
Volunteering and service-learning projects (VSLPs) both ask students to freely offer their time, skills, and abilities to help serve individuals, communities, and/or organizations in need. When VSLPs are incorporated as a required component of college or university courses, they also require a substantial amount of effort and coordination by course instructors. Instructors are tasked with the responsibilities of establishing relationships with community partners; communicating guidelines and expectations for student involvement; monitoring and evaluating student participation; and—in the case of service-learning—assessing student learning outcomes derived from the project.

The incorporation of VSLPs in higher education has yielded much praise in the scholarship of teaching and learning. When done correctly, VSLPs have been found to enhance students’ civic responsibility [3, 4], reduce negative stereotypes of outgroups [5, 6], increase empathy [7, 8], and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills [2]. These benefits are notable, however the potential consequences of requiring VSLPs in higher education are less frequently considered. This is especially true for students from marginalized communities who may lack the time and resources required to complete VSLPs. Even less attention has been paid to the negative impacts VSLPs may impose upon instructors – particularly those in precarious positions in academia, such as adjuncts and non-tenured professors. VSLPs may produce valuable learning outcomes for students, but requiring these types of projects may exacerbate pre-existing inequities in higher education for both students and faculty.

Analyzing previous scholarship and current case studies from both a student and professor who have first-hand experience with VSLPs, this chapter critically examines the educational and professional challenges VSLPs may present for both students and faculty. The purpose of this writing is to shed light on the ways that VSLPs may demand unrealistic, unattainable, or problematic expectations from students and faculty, and how students and faculty from marginalized communities and/or precarious positions are most negatively impacted. It is my hope that by better understanding how and why these challenges exist, we may be able to shift our practices toward an equity-based model of VSLPs in higher education.

2. Problems with VSLPs in higher education

Instructors who incorporate VSLPs into their curriculum sometimes do so with the intent of increasing students’ cultural competency and empathy for different cultures. While good-intentioned, this can result in the opposite effect, further fostering perceived difference between people in communities who serve and those who require service. Framing VSLPs as an opportunity to help communities “in need” or “deficient” enables students to “...separate themselves from the problems they encounter. They fail to see that often the same social structures which work well for them create the needs in the communities in which they do service-learning,” [9].

Many students engaged in VSLPs enter and “serve” communities that they are not part of, which can feed into the trope that these communities are in some way incapable of taking care of themselves and solving their own problems [9]. Another critique of VSLPs is that they reinforce a problematic binary between those who serve (privileged) and those who need to be served (oppressed) [10]. Institutions may apply this oversimplified dichotomy to support the implementation of compulsory VSLPs, however doing so glosses over the reality that both students and community members being served occupy multiple, intersecting identities of privilege and oppression.
For example, research suggests that students’ gender, age, race, and social class can affect how students engage with and learn from service-learning [3, 4, 10–13].

When VSLPs in higher education are required for students rather than being optional, proponents suggest that students who would not normally volunteer for such projects may also reap their benefits. However, critics argue that requiring students to participate in service learning is an unethical practice of involuntary servitude [14, 15]. Students who feel forced to volunteer their time and energy toward VSLPs may complete their service poorly, which could result in negative learning outcomes for themselves and their classmates. Perhaps most problematic is that students who fail to meet performance expectations may waste the time and resources of the community partners they are working with, which in turn further disadvantages the communities they are striving to serve.

Effective VSLPs often require much labor at the expense of the community partner [16, 17]. Students need training, supervision, support, and evaluation, all of which tap into the already limited resources partnering agencies have to offer. This reality contradicts the idea that service learners offer “free labor” through volunteering their time and talents. Such claims rely on the falsely held belief that students enter sites already equipped with knowledge and skills they need to serve. To this end, colleges and universities should equitably contribute their resources to service-learning agencies. While some institutions may do this, no such democratic partnership is guaranteed. In such cases, individual professors may be expected to pick up the extra work and costs required to effectively and ethically conduct service-learning projects.

In the following section, I unpack two case studies examining the pros and cons of requiring VSLPs in higher education. The first case study centers on a university student who was required to complete volunteer work for one of their courses. The second case study presents the experiences of a university professor who required their students to complete a service-learning project. While both case studies echo many of the benefits and challenges that prior research on VSLPs has unveiled, these case studies also further the discourse by presenting unique insights. Namely, both the student and the professor shed light on ways in which required VSLPs are enmeshed with invisible labor and restraints that disproportionately impact students and professors from marginalized communities. Better understanding the barriers and restrictions students and instructors face when implementing and completing VSLPs can inform recommendations for an equity-based model.

3. University context for case studies

Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) are universities and colleges in the United States that enroll a significant percentage of self-identified minority students from historically underrepresented and marginalized racial and ethnic groups such as American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian, Pacific Islander, Black (not of Hispanic origin), Hispanic, and two or more of these groups. "University Q" is one such MSI with the additional federal designation of being a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).

The Carnegie Classification for University Q is “R2,” meaning a doctoral university with “high research activity” [18]. This designation is significant, as many faculty have had to pivot from prioritizing teaching to finding ways to simultaneously prioritize teaching and research or, in some cases, prioritize research above teaching.
This expectation can alter and increase workloads, which in turn impacts faculty members’ decisions about whether VSLPs are feasible. According to the University Q Data Center [19], 10,762 students were enrolled at the university during Fall 2021, of which 60 percent (6,438 students) were from underrepresented minority groups. For further context, nearly 50 percent of University Q students self-identified as Hispanic, and nearly 50 percent identified as first-generation students. While I do not have data on students’ socioeconomic backgrounds, based on my own observations and conversations with students and colleagues, it seems that a significant portion of University Q students work part time or full time while carrying full course loads. A number of those working students also have substantial caregiving responsibilities.

3.1 Case study 1: student perspective

Student A is a current student at University Q. They completed a five-week summer course in 2022, in which the professor asked students to volunteer at a senior living facility once a week for the duration of the course.

Reflecting on their time volunteering at the facility, Student A reported experiencing many of the benefits the literature has associated with VSLPs. Student A described how volunteering provided students with direct, real-world context for some of the scientific concepts and ideas that were being covered in the class. Student A described how interacting with residents at the facility provided a “better understanding of how they live their day-to-day life” rather than solely relying on secondhand accounts provided through readings or lectures. Student A also felt a sense of beneficence after volunteering, describing their experience as a rewarding opportunity to contribute to their community.

Despite these positive outcomes, Student A identified a number of barriers that prevented them – and likely others – from fully engaging with the volunteer experience. The professor of the course wanted students to volunteer at the facility once a week, but Student A described several factors that made that expectation unattainable. Student A explained that the professor encouraged students to volunteer at one particular senior living facility because the professor had established a good relationship with them as a community partner. However, this particular facility had limited hours for people to volunteer, specifically between the hours of 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. The facility also only welcomed volunteers Monday through Thursday. Student A explained, “I actually could only go twice in the five weeks because I was working basically every day, so it was hard to find time. And yeah, they weren’t open on weekends, either.”

Student A said the professor did mention an alternative facility with more flexible hours that students could volunteer at if the preferred option was not viable, but Student A suggested that the additional site still did not resolve accessibility issues. They explained, “the secondary location had better hours, but with the way my schedule was, I was working like almost every day from 8 or 9 a.m. to about 5 p.m. So I really couldn’t make, even with that other alternative, I couldn’t really make it for the most part.”

Another challenge Student A addressed was transportation to the volunteer site. The facility recommended by the professor was located nearly ten miles from the university. Commuting from the university to the facility would take roughly 20 minutes by car, but that commute would take closer to an hour for students utilizing public transportation. Student A had their own vehicle, but acknowledged
that “for students who don’t have cars... that was a big hurdle for them... They would have to figure out, either coordinate with someone or figure out a way to get their on their own volition.”

When asked what suggestions Student A would offer to professors who plan to ask their students to volunteer, their answer was clear: “Flexibility is the main thing... Have a few alternative assignments in place... A lot of students don’t have access to cars, so they need to rely on public transportation, or get an Uber, which either take a lot of time or cost a lot of money... especially for students that also are super busy because they are doing full-time work.”

Despite the barriers associated with asking students to volunteer, Student A still thought the benefits of the project outweighed the challenges. They explained, “I still think it provides a lot of value to the students here. It gets students out of their comfort zone. They kind of serve the community, and I guess see different perspectives and see and experience things that they might not have experienced, because I guess a lot of students live in their own bubble... They rarely, if ever, go venture out to the other parts and see how people in the city are living, or other issues that you know people might face... I think students benefit a lot from that.”

While Student A’s professor was understanding and lenient with students on a case-by-case basis who could not meet the once a week commitment, it is nonetheless important to consider the implications of instructors asking students to complete volunteer work knowing that the requests are unattainable for many. Student A was employed in addition to their studies – as are 40 percent of full-time college students and 74 percent of part-time college students in the United States [20]. Operating from the assumption that students have the time, resources, and flexibility to volunteer outside of regularly scheduled class hours implies that students ought to be able to meet these demands, regardless of their circumstances.

3.2 Case study 2: faculty perspective

“It was a really great experience, but after all was said and done, I was like, I’m never doing this again.” – Professor Z.

Professor Z views service-learning as a tool to engage students in critical thinking and applied learning, pedagogical practices that they believe should always be priorities, regardless the discipline or topic. When it comes to implementing service-learning in their courses, however, Professor Z has had a complicated – and at times, problematic – series of experiences over the past decade. In their early years as a tenure-track professor at an HSI, Professor Z observed that many college students needed more exposure, practice, and scaffolding with critical thinking. Professor Z critiqued the deficit-based mindset that is often ascribed to students at HSIs. They explained, “It wasn’t that students weren’t smart... students just weren’t getting the tools.” Rather than viewing their students in need of fixing, Professor Z prioritized identifying students’ strengths and building learning opportunities upon those assets. One potential strength Professor Z identified to build upon for these students was applied learning experiences outside of the classroom.

To become familiar with university policies involved with asking students to volunteer off campus, Professor Z thought it was more practical to first experiment with taking students on a field trip to a local organization that could become a potential site for future service-learning projects. Professor Z explained how organizing a seemingly simple task such as an educational field trip was, instead, an intricately
complex endeavor situated in a system of bureaucracy and power. Professor Z was careful to follow their university’s protocols for requiring students to travel off campus, even though the organization was only a few miles away. They explained, “At the time, I didn’t have tenure … You have to think of worst-case scenarios,” implying that if anything would go wrong, they could potentially lose their job. After a series of inquiries, Professor Z obtained the required documentation that is supposed to be completed whenever students travel off campus. Before students could go on the field trip, the university required 1) a detailed trip itinerary, 2) a list of participants and signatures, 3) medical treatment authorization forms for each traveler, 4) emergency contact information for each traveler, 5) driver release forms for anyone driving to the site, and 6) a finalized student travel checklist.

Barriers to service-learning created by red tape on the university’s side are rarely discussed in the literature, which made me intrigued as to why Professor Z had the intuition to inquire about the appropriate paper trail. Professor Z explained how being a faculty member affiliated with underrepresented groups in academia affects their approach toward experimenting with and developing new pedagogy. They elaborated, “My outsider status ends up being amplified here. From day one, I was under a magnifying glass. Anything regarding teaching pedagogy was met with questions or skepticism.” To ensure that nothing would be held against them should anything go wrong, Professor Z was “in constant communication [with various university departments] because the last thing I needed was someone coming back at me. And again, this was for one afternoon at the organization.”

The field trip was a success, but the additional labor and scrutiny Professor Z endured deterred them from further developing the project for future classes. They said, “It was a really great experience, but after all was said and done, I was like, I’m never doing this again.” Professor Z explained that while students engaged in meaningful learning and felt personally rewarded for investing in their community, Professor Z received little to no credit toward promotion and tenure for successfully implementing the project, despite the excessive time and labor that went into it. Professor Z explained that to the university, “it was as if I didn’t do anything. For an individual faculty member who didn’t have tenure, I could have spent that time doing something else – all those hours I could have been working on a conference paper, working on an R&R [revise and resubmit] … and then I was placed in certain ethical and moral dilemmas … it was too stressful, and It shouldn’t be that way.”

Professor Z waited five years before they reintegrated a full service-learning project into their course. While Professor Z views the project as largely beneficial to both the community partners and the students involved, they continue to hold concerns about the university’s lack of support and recognition for the amount of work that instructors put into developing successful service-learning projects. Professor Z’s insight also highlights the added dimensions of precarity that faculty with marginalized identities must navigate when determining whether developing and implementing service-learning projects is in their best interest, professionally. “Service-learning is one of many considerations of how much labor am I going to engage in, but also how much potential conflict I’m going to engage in any season. Even when my expertise and value system tell me the best way to teach and reach my students and make a difference… I have to be aware of who I am and how I will be judged. I’m not gonna get bogged down in the negativity of it. I just need to be very practical and realistic of the formal and informal constraints.”
4. Conclusion

The findings from case studies should not be considered generalizable to the entire population, nonetheless this rich, in-depth form of qualitative data analysis can provide nuanced insight to underexamined topics [21]. The case studies presented here by Student A and Professor Z spark thoughtful questions about VSLPs – particularly in the context of MSIs – and identify several avenues worthy of further research.

The educational and personal benefits students experience when completing VSLPs may be overshadowing the accessibility barriers many students face when asked to complete VSLPs – particularly for students that are low-income, students without reliable transportation, students that are working part or full-time, and students with dependents. The lack of scholarly attention to this issue suggests that most instructors who require VSLPs in their courses operate from the privileged assumption that all students have the means and abilities to volunteer their time and energy outside of regularly scheduled class hours. Students lacking the resources to complete VSLPs may suffer worse grades as a result, demonstrating how required VSLPs could inadvertently worsen education disparities for marginalized groups, despite the well-documented educational benefits VSLPs can provide.

The challenges professors face developing and implementing VSLPs also warrant further scrutiny. Failing to adhere to institutional policies and to submit required documentation regarding student travel off campus can put professors in precarious positions should something happen to a student while they are completing the VSLP. I have never seen a discussion about the burdensome yet important institutional travel policies that precede VSLPs in the literature, which potentially suggests that many educators utilizing VSLPs are overlooking this part of the process. Improved transparency and discussion about student travel policies for VSLPs will help ensure that students, faculty, and community partners are all protected.

The amount of time and labor instructors put into developing, implementing, and evaluating VSLPs also deserves further consideration. Successful VSLPs require much effort from instructors. For college professors with research expectations beyond teaching, choosing to incorporate VSLPs into their courses may negatively impact their pursuit of promotion and tenure. Given that women faculty and faculty of color complete disproportionate amounts of service work [22–24] VSLPs may further exacerbate disparities amongst professors in higher education.

Drawing from previous scholarship and considering the experiences of Student A and Professor Z, I present the following recommendations to move toward an equity-based model for VSLPs in higher education. While this list is not exhaustive, institutions and instructors who adopt these practices will promote equitable teaching, learning, and professional development in alignment with social justice.

1. Make VSLPs optional rather than mandatory.
2. Offer an alternative assignment for students who are not able to complete the VSLP.
3. Choose community partners with flexible hours and modalities for students to volunteer, including nights, weekends, and remote opportunities.
4. Provide multiple options for community partners so students may choose the one that best meets their needs in terms of location and hours of operation.

5. Include at least one community partner at the college or university to promote accessibility for students living on or near campus.

6. Improve transparency around institutional student travel policies in relation to VSLPs.

7. Request that institutions create exceptions for bureaucratic policies and red tape surrounding “student travel” that may discourage faculty from developing service-learning projects within their local communities.

8. Encourage departments, colleges, and universities to revise guidelines to ensure that professors designing and implementing VSLPs are given adequate credit toward promotion and tenure.

9. Require colleges and universities to equitably contribute their resources to service-learning agencies to reduce the burdens imposed upon community partners and instructors.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Thanks

I would like to thank Student A and Professor Z for volunteering to share their experiences with me. Collecting and analyzing stories such as theirs is a necessary in order to cultivate a shift toward an equity-based model for VSLPs.

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