

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
MORGRIDGE CENTER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

REPORT OF RESULTS FROM  
FALL 2009  
SERVICE-LEARNING STUDENT WEB-BASED SURVEY

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During the Fall 2009 semester, the Morgridge Center for Public Service fielded a web-based survey designed to measure student outcomes from participating in service-learning courses. Students were asked to complete a pre-test during the first week of courses, and a post-test during the second-to-last week of class. The pre-test was approximately 20 minutes in length, and the post-test was approximately 10 minutes in length.

**Recruitment and response rates**

Our goal was to survey all students enrolled in every known service-learning course on campus in the Fall 2009 semester. Because of the regulations of the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, we can not obtain email rosters of students enrolled in these courses. Instead, we sent emails to the instructors of these courses that asked them to please forward the weblink for the survey to their students. We sent these invitation emails to the instructors of 33 courses.<sup>1</sup> We can not know which instructors forwarded the invitations to their students. However, students from 18 different (courses responded to the pretest, and students from 16 different courses responded to the posttest. Table 1 (below, and continued on next page) displays the courses in which respondents to the survey were enrolled.

**Table 1: Courses with Students Participating in the Fall 2009 Web Survey**

Department	Course Number	Course Title	Instructor	Pretest	Posttest
Afro-American Studies	151	Introduction to Contemporary Afro-American Society	Thorton, M.		x
Biology	375	Special Topics: Engaging Students in Science--Leading After-School Science Clubs	Ledin, D.; Wright, S.	x	x
Botany	670	Adaptive Restoration Lab	Zedler, J.	x	x
Chican@ and Latin@ Studies	657	Understanding Latino Families and Communities	Magaña, S.	x	

<sup>1</sup> Cross-listed courses are counted only once in this number.

**Table 1 (continued): Courses with Students Participating in the Fall 2009 Web Survey**

<b>Department</b>	<b>Course Number</b>	<b>Course Title</b>	<b>Instructor</b>	<b>Pretest</b>	<b>Posttest</b>
English	201	Intermediate Composition	Lorimer, R.	x	x
English	201	Intermediate Composition	Stock, D.	x	x
Environmental Studies, Gaylord Nelson Institute for	402	Topics in Environmentalism: Social & Human Studies--Environmental Strategy and Sustainability	Eggert, T.	x	x
Environmental Studies, Gaylord Nelson Institute for	402	Topics in Environmentalism: Social & Human Studies--Business and the Social Side of Sustainability	Eggert, T.	x	x
Environmental Studies, Gaylord Nelson Institute for	402	Topics in Environmentalism: Social & Human Studies--Community Engagement through Film	Mitman, G.; Helfand, J.	x	x
Horticulture	120	Survey of Horticulture	Patterson, S.	x	x
Human Development & Family Studies	663	Developmental & Family Assessment	Poehlmann, J.	x	x
Integrated Liberal Studies (ILS)	357	Peer Mentor Seminar	Brantly, S.	x	x
Interdisciplinary courses (SoHE)	650	Parent Education and Support Programs	Riley, D.	x	x
Psychology Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education	399	Service-Learning in Psychology	Moore, C.	x	
	300	Individuals with Disabilities Topics in Contemporary Social Welfare: PAVE (Peer Edu, Fraternity Coalition)	Malmgren, K.	x	x
Social Work	672	Special topics - Spanish Language Practice:	Schroepfer, T.	x	x
Spanish	319	Medical Spanish	Gemrich, A.	x	x
TechShop Madison			Stoecker, R.	x	x
Theatre and Drama	357	Introduction to Theatre for Cultural and Social Awareness	Sims, P.	x	

We used several methods to entice students to complete the surveys. Respondents in each wave were offered the opportunity to enroll in a lottery for \$100. We asked instructors for each of these courses to persuade the students to participate. Also, we directly invited students who responded to the pretest to participate in the posttest by contacting them via the email addresses they provided to enroll in the lottery. These strategies resulted in the

following response rates: EMAILED PHIL FOR HOW TO GET ENROLLMENT NUMBERs

Pre-test: 96 respondents out of a possible XXX for a response rate of xx%

Post-test: 78 respondents out of a possible XXX for a rate of xx%

Panel: 37 of the 96 pre-test respondents completed the post-test for a panel response rate of 39%.

Please note: The panel is composed of students who completed both the pretest and the posttest and provided an email address by enrolling in the lottery in both of those waves. Since we could not obtain the email rosters for the courses from instructors or the registrar and directly contact students via email, we were able to match respondents only if they provided an email address at the end of the survey in order to enroll in the lottery.<sup>2</sup>

## OVERVIEW

What follows is a summary of the results of these surveys. Also included with this report are a full set of marginals for the pre-test and post-test, as well as a printable version of each survey. We welcome feedback on all aspects of the survey. Please contact Kathy Walsh at [kwalsh2@wisc.edu](mailto:kwalsh2@wisc.edu).

## DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

Respondents to the surveys tended to be white, female, instate students in their final two years of college, reflecting what we believe to be the typical demographics of service-learning students on the UW-Madison campus. (Among the pre-test respondents who answered the demographic questions, 90% were white; 81% were female; 63% were instate students; and 65% were juniors, seniors or graduate students.)

## SURVEY RESPONDENTS HIGHLY ENGAGED

In the pre-test, we asked students about their level of engagement in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities, and civic and political affairs.<sup>3</sup> Responses to all items suggest that these students are engaged in a variety of activities. 58% worked part-time in addition to taking courses. 77% were engaged in some type of co-curricular activity such as sports, band, newspaper, student government, or student organizations. 55% performed some amount of community service or volunteering in the previous week that they filled out the survey. These students had a pattern of community service before they came to campus: 89% had been involved in *voluntary* service before coming to UW-Madison. All of the pre-test respondents had performed some type of civic or political act in the preceding 12 months,

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<sup>2</sup> These email addresses were converted into identity numbers and then deleted from the data. We also considered using the IP addresses from which the respondent took the survey as means of identifying respondents, but many students took the surveys from computer labs, invalidating this approach.

<sup>3</sup> Description of results is based on the number of students who provided answers to the questions under discussion.

and 71% of them had performed a political act in the preceding 12 months.<sup>4</sup> 90% followed national government and public affairs at least sometimes, and 83% reported talking with family or friends about politics or government in the past month.<sup>5</sup>

The one exception to this pattern of engagement is that only half of pre-test respondents reporting following *local* government and public affairs at least sometimes.

### REASONS FOR TAKING THE SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE

The top three reasons students gave for taking their service-learning course were an interest in the subject matter, a desire to participate in service activity in the community, and a desire to include service on their resume (Table 2).

	Mean response
Interested in subject matter	4.4
Wanted to serve in community	4.2
Wanted to put service on resume	3.7
Course offered at convenient time	3.6
Heard professor was good	2.7
Course filled a requirement	2.0
Advisor recommended the course	1.8

Source: Pre-test, N=87.

Note: Responses ranged from 1 to 5, where 5 represents strongest agreement with that statement as a reason for enrolling.

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<sup>4</sup> *Civic acts* include the following: Community service or volunteering; Contacting a newspaper or magazine to express an opinion; Calling in to a radio or television talk show to express an opinion; Taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration; Signing an e-mail petition about an issue; Signing a written petition about an issue; \*Not\* buying a good or service because of the conditions under which the product is made, or because you dislike the conduct of the company; Buying a certain product or service because you like the values of the company that produces or provides it; Personally walking, running, or bicycling for a charitable cause; Helping to raise money for a charitable cause; Working with others to solve a community problem; Donating money to a group or association, locally or nationally; Belonging to a group or association, locally or nationally. *Political acts* include: Contacting or visiting a public official; Working as a canvasser such as going door-to-door for a political group or candidate; Talking to people to try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates; Wearing a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or placed a sign in front of the place you live; Working for a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supported candidates; and Contributing money to a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supported candidates.

<sup>5</sup> The most popular way of following the news for these students was via the internet.



## END-OF-SEMESTER PERCEPTIONS OF COURSE

Students participating in the post-test indicated that they had obtained a range of positive outcomes from enrolling in the course. Table 3 displays these responses. Perhaps most notable is that the average response was at least a 4.0 (on the 1 to 5 scale)<sup>6</sup> with the statements that the service activities that were part of the course were beneficial to the community, the course activities helped students recognize the everyday application of the course material, the course inspired students to perform service after the course ended, and the class activities helped them to better understand the course material.

	Mean response
Inspired to perform service	4.2
Class activities helped me understand course material	4.2
Service activities beneficial to community	4.3
Course helped with career choice*	2.5
Enhanced ability to solve problems	3.6
Activities helped me see everyday application	4.4
Service was recognized by community participants	4.1
Class enhanced ability to think critically*	2.9
One of the best courses I have taken at UW-Madison	3.8

Source: Post-test, N=68-70 for each item.

Note: Responses ranged from 1 to 5, where 1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree.

\* Question was worded in opposite valence to minimize acquiescence bias across the battery of items. Responses have been recoded such that higher values represent positive perceptions. Thus, throughout the table, higher values represent more agreement that the course led to the listed outcome.

We also asked students about some of the details of their service-learning course. Most of the students reported positive experiences with their academic experience. Tables 4 and 5 display these responses. In addition, we learned that 73% of respondents spent about a half or more of their service time directly interacting with the people who benefited from their service. 86% spent at least some course time discussing their service experience.

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<sup>6</sup> A 4 is equivalent to a response of “agree” from among “strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree.”

	Mean response
Personal interaction with instructor	4.4
Engaged in discussion with other students*	3.0
Service experience was linked to class*	3.2
Transportation to service site not difficult*	3.1
Reflection was regular part of the course	4.3
Comfortable asking instructor questions	4.4

Source: Post-test, N=68-70 for each item.

Note: N=Responses ranged from 1 to 5, where 1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree.

\* Question worded in opposite valence to minimize acquiescence bias across the set of items. Responses have been recoded such that higher values represent positive perceptions.

	Percent Yes
Service-learning fellow <sup>7</sup>	27%
Instructor participated in service	52%
Student served with classmates	81%
Course projects connected to service	80%
Informed of free taxi service	33%

Source: Post-test, N=45 to 67.

## **CHANGE IN ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS**

Many of the questions we asked were designed to measure change in opinions over the course of the semester about society, perceived competence in intercultural relations, and the merits of service. Only 37 students participated in both the pre-test and the post-test, therefore, our ability to detect statistically significant change is limited. Also, we did not include a comparison group in this pilot test of the study; therefore, we can only make tentative claims that any change that we do observe is due to participation in the course. Nevertheless the results are instructive.

### **Self-reports of competence in intercultural relations**

We observed no significant difference over time among the 37 people participating in the pre-test and post-test on the following items:

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<sup>7</sup> Of the respondents who reported that a service-learning fellow had been assigned to their course, 75% said that they had at least one one-to-one interaction with this person during the semester. There were many nonresponses on this question (33 out of a possible 78), suggesting many students were unsure whether or not their course had been assigned a fellow.

- How comfortable are you with working closely with people from different racial, ethnic, or cultural groups?
- How aware are you of your own weaknesses and strengths?
- How much do you have a deep understanding of people with backgrounds different from your own?
- How much do you know that you can make a positive difference in the lives of others?
- How much do you know how to lead in a cross-cultural situation?
- How much do you believe you have a responsibility to provide community service?
- How much do you have a good understanding of the needs in the community in which the University of Wisconsin-Madison is located?
- How much do you know how to communicate your ideas in a cross-cultural situation?
- How confident are you in your critical thinking and problem-solving skills?
- How confident are you in your interpersonal and communication skills?
- How much do you believe that you have good leadership abilities and skills?

### **Beliefs about social justice**

We also observed little over-time change on a set of items that asked about perceptions about social justice. We observed statistically significant change on 2 of 11 questions on this topic. There was no significant difference on the 8 following agree-disagree format questions:

- There are boundless opportunities available to all people, but some people are poor because they choose to be poor.
- The problems that cause people to need social services are frequently the result of circumstances beyond their control.
- A person's racial background in this society does not interfere with everything he or she wants to achieve.
- Most misfortunes that occur to people are frequently the result of circumstances beyond their control.
- Many whites show a real lack of understanding of the problems that people of color face.
- The person's skill and effort are important but many people still face serious discrimination in our society.
- Individuals are responsible for their own misfortunes.
- In the generation since the civil rights movement, our society has done enough to promote the welfare of people of color.

Also, there was no significant change on a question that asked respondents to choose one of two statements best reflecting their view of society:

- 1) All people in the United States have equal access to education, health care, and employment opportunity.

2) People have different access to education, health care and employment opportunity due to race, gender, and other socioeconomic reasons.

Among the 2 items on which we did see statistically significant change, the change was in the direction of attributing injustice to structural causes or “the system,” and perceiving more discrimination, as Table 6 displays.

<b>Table 6: Social Justice Questions Revealing Overtime Change</b>			
	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	p-value
The system prevents people of color from getting their fair share of the good things in life, such as better jobs and more money.	3.00	3.37	.02
Most people of color are no longer discriminated against in the United States.	2.23	1.89	.02

Source: Pre-test and Post-test, N=35.

Note: Responses ranged from 1=Disagree strongly to 5=Agree strongly. P-values represent one-tailed tests.

### **PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE**

When asked about the effects of community service, respondents displayed no change with respect to the belief that it helps to change public policy, individuals or create programs to address social problems. Also, when asked about reasons for engaging in service through their service-learning courses, students displayed no change in the belief that it “is necessary because it is required by the class,” because it “is important for me personally to become a community leader,” because it “is necessary because it is important for me personally to volunteer my time helping people in need,” or because it “is important for me personally to work toward equal opportunity for all U.S. citizens.” Finally, we also included items asking about the efficacy of different strategies for dealing with social problems. The respondents displayed either no change or a reduction in the perceived efficacy of each of them, with one of these changes reaching statistical significance (as Table 7 displays).

<b>Table 7: Efficacy of Strategies for Addressing Social Problems</b>			
	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	P-value
Reach out to specific people in need and provide charitable giving?	3.68	3.68	.50
Institute reforms within the current system to change our communities?	4.17	3.83	.02
Change the political structures of the society to increase equity in access to resources?	3.91	3.83	.28

Source: Pre-test and Post-test, N=35.

Note: Responses ranged from 1=Disagree strongly to 5=Agree strongly. P-values represent one-tailed tests.

Related to this lack of change toward believing in the effectiveness of community service is the result that respondents to both surveys did not display an increase in using various media to obtain news, following national or local affairs, or in talking to their friends and family about politics or government.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This small-scale web survey has provided useful information on students' reactions to service-learning courses as well as some indications of possible outcomes of these courses on our campus. In the spring 2009 we piloted this survey on just 4 service-learning courses. The results obtained this past semester are nearly identical. The respondents to the survey in both semester are highly engaged, report a great deal of satisfaction with their service-learning course, and yet exhibit little attitude change except for a glimmer of evidence that participating in a service-learning course leads to a weakening in the perceived efficacy of community service. The fact that we found suggestions of this last pattern in both semesters begs for further study on the issue of what service-learning does to individuals' conceptions about community service.

Another striking similarity between the pilot study and the Fall 2009 study is that the two social justice items on which we observed change in Fall 2009 also showed change in Spring 2009. That is, in both semesters respondents agreed more strongly at the end of the term that "The system prevents people of color from getting their fair share of the good things in life, such as better jobs and more money" and disagreed more strongly that "Most people of color are no longer discriminated against in the United States" (Table 6). This is a strong suggestion that the typical service-learning course on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus exposes students to structural causes of racial inequality as well as the extent of racial discrimination in the United States.

The lack of change on many of the other attitude items could be read as the weak effect of service-learning courses on students' understanding of the world around them. However, a closer look at the data suggests that in many cases we are seeing a ceiling effect. That is, the average pretest response on many of the items repeated on the posttest was already near one end of the scale. This is not to say that our students exhibit no room for attitude change when they begin a service-learning course. For example, the average pretest response to the item "How much do you have a good understanding of the needs in the community?" is the middle response, "somewhat," and that remained unchanged on the post-test.

This fact, combined with the repeated evidence of increasing skepticism about the efficacy of community service suggests that, in addition to the web survey, we use more in-depth approaches to uncover the understandings that our students' are obtaining from their service-learning courses.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Portions of these surveys have been modeled after studies reported in the following publications:

- Lopez, Gretchen E., Patricia Gurin, and Biren A. Nagda. 1998. "Education and Understanding Structural Causes for Group Inequalities." *Political Psychology* 19 (2) 305-329.

- Ohio-State Service-Learning Student Survey accessed at <http://service-learning.osu.edu/students.php>.
- Zukin, Cliff, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, and Michael X. Delli Carpini, 2006. *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life and the Changing American Citizen*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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