

Impact of Mandatory Service-Learning on Students' Post-Graduation Civic Engagement

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Motivation

- Service-learning (SL) is a high impact experiential learning pedagogy.
 - Increasing consensus that SL can be employed as a “potent civic educator” (Battistoni, 2017).
 - An increase in interest to use SL to promote students’ civic growth among HEIs (Bringle, Hahn, & Hatcher, 2019). PolyU motto: “To Learn and to apply, for the benefit of mankind.”
- Little is known on whether SL learning outcomes persist or whether they translate to civic engagement post-graduation, even less is known when SL is mandatory.
- This study examines the longer-term impact of mandatory service-learning on post-graduation civic engagement.

Civic engagement in the literature

- “Describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (Adler & Groggin, 2005).
- “Takes many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation” (Della Carpini, n.d.).
- Is a multifaceted construct (Bringle, Hahn & Hatcher, 2019; Bringle & Wall, 2020).

Civic engagement in our study

- Civic engagement refers to whether the alumna/us in the period after graduation:
 - Gave donations to charities
 - Participated in voluntary/community service for the needy
 - Engaged in other activities for the betterment of the local or global community

What we do & do not know

Corresponding ref. in **Appendix A**

- Most studies find that SL programs are effective in developing students' sense of social responsibility and increased commitment to serve the community.
- But keeping in mind some caveats:
 - Both observational and quasi-experimental studies rely on mainly pre-post survey design to assess self-reported gains
 - Majority set in the North-American context
 - Impact measured at the conclusion of the program, thus most are on changes in attitudes, knowledge and skills
 - Little is known about the impact of mandatory programs with some exceptions
- **Do these gains from mandatory SL programs translate to behavioural changes in the longer-term?**

What we do & do not know

Corresponding ref. in **Appendix B**

- Mandatory programs
 - **Critiques:** those with no initial inclination may develop negative attitudes and “pollute” the experience for others; external control may lessen the meaning of service for those with intrinsic motivation
- Longer-term studies
 - **Difficulties:** finding an appropriate comparison group; tracking participants over time
 - **Optional SL:** most find that it does not significantly explain current civic activities above and beyond what past volunteer history does, or that it depends on the quality of SL experiences
 - **Mandatory SL:** alumni tend to have favourable views of the program, but due to a lack in comparison group, these studies focus on program features that “work” rather than whether mandatory SL works
 - **Optional volunteering:** volunteer history in high school or college is positively correlated with future volunteering
 - **Mandatory volunteering:** often leaves a sour taste in participants’ mouths, esp. among those who were not initially inclined

Where does this study fit?

- There is **suggestive evidence** that civic learning from SL “sticks” if the program is well structured and emphasizes students’ civic learning outcome (Janoski et al., 1998; Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005; Stukas et al., 1999).
- Very little is known about longer-term impact of (mandatory) SL programs that has a comparison group, especially in the Asian context.
- **Through alumni survey conducted approx. two years after graduation, this study examines:**
 - The Impact of mandatory SL on alumni’s (self-reported) post-graduation civic engagement;
 - How graduates view their mandatory SL experience.

Change in degree structure & curriculum

- Starting from the 2012/13 academic year, all universities supported by government funding in Hong Kong changed from a 3-year degree structure to a 4-year one
- In revamping the curriculum, PolyU put in a mandatory academic SL requirement to **nurture students' sense of social responsibility and citizenship**, along with other changes
 - “General University Requirement (GUR)” was designed and implemented that included five other components, in addition to SL

Service-Learning at PolyU

- How is mandatory service-learning structured in PolyU?
 - 3-credit academic subject with letter grade assessment
 - Integrates at least 40 hrs of service/direct interaction with clients
 - Subjects are offered by different academic departments, with the specific aim to help students fulfill the service-learning requirement and as part of the GE program
 - Four common intended learning outcomes, apart from course-specific ones:
 - Application: apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired to deal with complex issues in the service setting
 - Reflect: reflect on their role and responsibilities both as a professional in their chosen discipline and as a responsible citizen
 - Empathy: demonstrate empathy for people in need and a strong sense of civic responsibility
 - Linkage: demonstrate an understanding of the linkage between service-learning and the academic content of the subject.

- Implementation during the first year (2012/13)
 - An exit clause was in place for senior year intake students to take another subject in lieu of SL during the first year of implementation; some exemptions for approved reasons

Context of study

- The setting allowed us to compare 2014/15 graduates under the 3-year degree structure (**last cohort under “old” structure w/o SL**) with 2015/16 graduates under the 4-year structure with SL requirement (**first cohort under “new” structure w/ SL**) in their current civic engagement activities
 - Three groups: 2014/15 w/o SL; 2015/16 w/o SL; 2015/16 w/ mandatory SL
- We surveyed these students **approximately two years after graduation**, in 2017 and 2018
 - (1) participation in some form of community service during their undergraduate studies (yes or no); (2) current civic engagement activities (yes or no)

Data

Survey Collection Year	Valid Return	Valid Response Rate	Method
2017 2014/15 graduates w/o SL requirement	1171	22.20%	Hard copy by mail
2018 2015/16 graduates w/ SL requirement	951	30.90%	Hard copy by mail and online
N	2122		

Raw comparison in post-graduation civic engagement

% who reported:	2014/15	2015/16	p-value ($\chi^2_{df=1}$)
Donation	43.70%	46.40%	0.222
Volunteering	31.10%	36.70%	0.006
Any form of civic activities [#]	60.60%	65.10%	0.035
N	1171	951	

[#]Any form refers to donation/volunteering/other engagements. Each row of comparison is tested by the χ^2 test (two-tailed).

- The raw comparison confounds certain factors that may drive the variations in alumni's civic activities, such as their voluntary community service activities during undergraduate years.

Grouping based on service involvement during college

Participation in service during studies at PolyU	2014/15		2015/16	
	Count	%	Count	%
None	601	51.4%	178	19.5%
Community service only (any form)	568	48.6%	140	15.4%
Credit-bearing SL subject only	–	–	380	41.7%
Credit-bearing SL subject + community service (any form)	–	–	214	23.5%
N	1169	100%	912	100%

Community service activities refer to voluntary work apart from that required in SL

- 48.6% versus 38.9% participated in voluntary activities during studies in PolyU.

Impact of mandatory SL on civic engagement - donation

Participation in service during studies at PolyU	% of graduates reported having donated to charities		
	2014/15 No SL	2015/16 No SL	2015/16 With SL
No voluntary community service	38.6%	38.8%	44.2%
Voluntary community service (any form)	49.3%	45.0%	57.9%

$$\chi^2_{df=5} = 31.556, p < .001 \text{ (two-tailed)}$$

- Without community service (“not initially inclination”): 2014/15 vs 2015/16 cohort % who reported having donated to charities is similar among those without SL, but higher among those under mandatory SL.
- With community service (“initially inclined”): did not see their current engagement decrease as a result of mandatory SL.

Impact of mandatory SL on civic engagement - volunteering

Participation in service during studies at PolyU	% of graduates reported current voluntary/community service		
	2014/15 No SL	2015/16 No SL	2015/16 With SL
No voluntary community service	12.1%	17.4%	35.5%
Voluntary community service (any form)	51.1%	45.0%	49.5%

$$\chi^2_{df=5} = 255.8, p < .001 \text{ (two-tailed)}$$

- Without community service (“not initially inclined”): % who reported having volunteered is three times higher among those under mandatory SL.
 - With community service (“initially inclined”): SL did not affect post-graduation volunteering significantly.
- Making service mandatory through SL “did not leave a sour taste.” On the contrary, it had a large impact among those who were not “initially inclined.”

Impact of mandatory SL on civic engagement - any form

Participation in service during studies at PolyU	% of graduates with any form of civic engagement		
	2014/15 No SL	2015/16 No SL With SL	
No voluntary community service	45.6%	49.4%	63.4%
Voluntary community service (any form)	76.6%	75.0%	75.2%

$$\chi^2_{df=5} = 158.8, p < .001 \text{ (two-tailed)}$$

- Without community service (“not initially inclined”): % who reported having any form of engagement is 1.3 times higher among those under mandatory SL.
- With community service (“initially inclined”): SL did not affect post-graduation engagement significantly.
- Making service mandatory through SL “did not leave a sour taste.” On the contrary, it had a large impact among those who were not “initially inclined.”

Graduates' views on mandatory SL

- “To what extent do you agree with the following statements about Service-Learning at PolyU?”

	(a) Agree/ Strongly Agree	(b) Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	(c) Neutral	(a)/(b)
SL is one of the most rewarding learning experiences during my study at PolyU	55.3%	17.8%	26.8%	≈3
I learned the joy and value of giving and helping others through the SL experience	63.8%	11.0%	25.3%	≈6
Requiring students to complete a credit-bearing SL subject is good for well-rounded education of PolyU students	61.0%	12.8%	26.3%	≈5

Limitations & Delimitation

- The two groups are non-equivalent in other characteristics
 - Difference in other extracurricular activities provided by the university, and degree structure additionally to other GUR
 - There were changes in the secondary school structure & curriculum as well, e.g., other learning experience (OLE) in the new senior secondary school curriculum
 - However:
 - Still similar student demographic, culture, faculty, undergraduate experience
 - Truly randomized controlled studies in this context are difficult to conduct
 - Non-randomized observational study comparison group requires a very large sample

Limitations & Delimitation

- Self-reported data
- Intensity of service was not measured, only yes/no
- Conducted in one university in Hong Kong
 - However:
 - Has a large sample size compared with other studies
 - Unlike multi-institutional studies, definition & requirements of mandatory SL are consistent across students
 - Additional evidence in the Asian context

Summary of Findings & Contributions

– Conclusion

- This study examines the longer-term impact of mandatory service-learning on graduates' continual civic engagement in Hong Kong
- Two years after graduation, we find
 - Higher post-graduation donation & volunteering among mandatory service-learning alumni who were not initially inclined;
 - Current civic engagement did not decrease among those who were predisposed to service.

– Contributions

- A relatively clean comparison to tease out selection effects & confounding factors compared with existing studies
- Additional longer-term evidence of SL impact, and in the Asian context
- Policy implication: when structured well, mandatory service-learning could indeed be a “potent civic educator” for impact that lasts

Future Studies

- Five year alumni survey
 - Even longer-term
 - Takes into account the intensity of service activities
- Factors of the mandatory service-learning programme that determine post-graduation engagement

Appendix A [Back](#)

- Short-term positive impact of SL on civic engagement
 - E.g., Markus et al. (1993); Astin et al. (2000); Grey et al. (2000); Hollis (2002); Lies et al. (2012); Prentice (2007)
- Short-term ambiguous impact of SL on civic engagement
 - E.g., Reinke (2003); Levesque-Bristol et al. (2010); Manning-Ouellett & Hemeber (2019); Jacobson et al. (2011)
- Short-term negative impact of SL on civic engagement
 - E.g., Stukas et al. (1999)
- Short-term impact of mandatory SL
 - E.g., Chan, Ngai, & Kwan (2019); Chan, Ngai, Lam, & Kwan (2020); Stukas et al. (1999) Cross-country study; Haski-Leventhal et al. (2010)

Appendix B [Back](#)

- Mandatory programs:
 - **Critiques:** see a summary in Haski et al. (2010).
 - **Supporting evidence:** E.g., Chan, Ngai, & Kwan (2019); Chan, Ngai, Lam, & Kwan (2020).
- Longer-term studies are scarce
 - **Optional SL:** Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005; Ma, Chan & Chan, 2016; Misa, Anderson, & Yamamura, 2005.
 - **Mandatory SL:** Moely & Ilustre, 2019; Tomkovick et al., 2008
 - **Optional volunteering:** Astin et al., 1999; Brudney & Gazley, 2006; Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998; Perry & Katula, 2000
 - **Mandatory volunteering:** Henderson et al., 2007; Warburton & Smith, 2003

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