

Beyond 40 Hours: Meaningful Community Service and High School Student Volunteerism in Ontario

Hoda Farahmandpour

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto
Leadership, Higher, and Adult Education
252 Bloor St West, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V6, Canada
Tel. 416-554-9028 * Hoda.farahmandpour@utoronto.ca

Abstract

The study reported here explores whether students in the mandated Ontario high school community service program consider their service requirement to be meaningful; the relationship between meaningful service and the potential for subsequent service; and other factors related to a meaningful experience and future service. A secondary analysis was conducted using a survey of 1,341 first-year university students. The responses were in part retrospective as students reflected upon their experience in the Ontario high school community service program. The main finding is that meaningful service is a predictor of subsequent service and can contribute to enhancing community service programs. Two policy implications emerge, that programs can focus on sectors within the social economy that provide a more meaningful experience and that greater collaboration between schools and nonprofit agencies that can provide meaningful placements for students is needed.

Key Words: community service, mandatory volunteering, youth development, meaningful service

Introduction

The study reported here contributes to research on mandatory community service by students and its potential for subsequent volunteering. The study is based in Ontario, Canada, where the Ministry of Education introduced the mandatory community service program in 1999. The program required 40 hours of community service over 4 years to graduate from high school, and in doing so Ontario became the first Canadian province to introduce community service as a diploma requirement. The policy aimed to “encourage students to develop awareness and understanding of civic responsibility and of the role they can play and the contributions they can make in supporting and strengthening their

communities” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, para. 1).

The program has every indication of being a fixture of secondary education, at least in the foreseeable future, therefore this paper contributes to the ongoing assessment of high school community service programs and how it might be strengthened so that it meets its objectives. One consistent finding is that if service lacks meaning or a real impact on the communities being served, there is a risk of diminishing the programs’ impact on both the student and community (Metz, McLellan, & Younnis, 2003; Gallant, Smale, & Arai, 2010). This paper reveals the degree to which community service performed by Ontario high school students is perceived to be meaningful, the role it plays in predicting subsequent community

service, and other factors associated with meaningful service and subsequent service.

Volunteering, Mandatory Community Service, and Meaningful Experience

Volunteering among youth is a characteristic of adolescence. The National Survey of Giving Volunteering and Participating (Hall, Lasby, Ayer, & Gibbons, 2009) found that young Canadians aged 15 to 24 were more likely to volunteer (58%) than Canadians in any other age group, and those aged 15 to 19 were more likely to volunteer than 20 to 24 year olds (65% vs. 47%). Young Canadians are also more likely than other age groups to feel dissatisfaction with a previous volunteering experience (13%) (Hall et al., 2009).

Some studies state that making service compulsory may undermine people's intrinsic motivation to volunteer in the future (Stukas, Snyder & Clary, 1999; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Others argue that the perceived benefits outweigh coerced service, with no negative effects on motivation (McLelland & Youniss, 2003; Metz & Youniss, 2005; Planty, Bozick, & Regnier, 2006). McLellan and Youniss (2003) suggest that the key factor is support - not whether the program is mandatory. Students with no support were less likely to engage in social service and more likely to choose functional work to complete school credits. They emphasize the importance of supporting youth in identifying meaningful acts of service and that if students are left unaccompanied, they will most often choose work that "demands less physical, cognitive, or emotional investment compared with social service" (p. 56).

The study assumes a meaningful service opportunity helps students contribute to their communities, and in doing so, develops student's capacity and talents. Meaningful service requires support from schools, teachers and families so that

students have access to opportunities, training and accompaniment to engage in service commensurate to their abilities, talents and needs of their environment. Taylor and Pancer (2007) found that if new volunteers have positive experiences within a supportive social milieu, they are more likely to continue their community work even after completing the mandatory requirements of the program.

Ontario's Experience with Meaningful Service

In Ontario, educators are concerned that service experiences are characterized by functional routine tasks rather than meaningful placements that put students in personal contact with other community members (Meinhard & Foster, 1999; Meinhard, Foster, & Wright, 2006). There are a number of studies that validate this claim (Brown, Pancer, Henderson, & Ellis-Hale, 2007; Febbraro, 2001; Hall et al, 2009). A common research finding from Ontario's program is that solely mandating community service is not sufficient to create subsequent, sustained community service (Henderson, Brown, Pancer, & Ellis-Hale, 2007; Meinhard et al., 2006; Padanyi, Baetz, Brown, & Henderson, 2010; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Padanyi et al. (2010) found that the program did not increase the rate of subsequent volunteering among students who had not volunteered prior to the mandated program. The nature, experience, and perceived impact of the service can all constitute as factors in determining whether students become committed, lifelong volunteers; as does the degree of support and accompaniment a young person needs in overcoming challenges in the path of service (Taylor & Pancer, 2007).

Research Questions

The following questions guide the data analysis to better understand the relationship

between meaningful service and the potential for subsequent community involvement:

1. Do students consider their mandated community service requirement to be meaningful?
2. What is the relationship between the mandated community service requirement and the potential for subsequent volunteering?
3. What factors are related to a meaningful mandated community service requirement and the potential for subsequent volunteering?

Methodology

This study represents a secondary analysis of existing survey data gathered by a research team led by Steven Brown of Wilfrid Laurier University. The mass survey, taken in 2007, is substantial, and is thus useful in identifying overall patterns. Moreover, the community service program in Ontario schools has not undergone any changes since its inception, making the requirements from students similar over time.

Participants

The research participants were 1,341 students among all first-year university students at four mid-sized post-secondary institutions in Southwestern Ontario. Respondents majored in fields within science, business and arts. The participants ranged from 17 to 33 years of age, with an average age being 19 ($SD = 0.88$). Of this sample, 70% were female, and 86.1% of the participants were born in Canada, and their family incomes were higher than average for Canadian families.

Students completed their community service requirements in a wide variety of settings: 21.9% within the school sector (i.e. tutoring, school fundraisers); 20.7% in the

sports sector (i.e. coaching or organizing in a club or league); 15.1% in religious or cultural settings (helping at a church, mosque or ethnic organizations); and 20% with other nonprofit organizations (i.e. food banks). The remaining students completed their placements in health, political and informal settings.

Data were collected from university rather than high school students so that the respondents had a complete experience with the mandatory program. The principal researchers acknowledged some limitations arising from their research methodology (Henderson et al., 2007). The sample is not representative of Ontario's general high school population because students entering university tend to be from backgrounds that are more inclined towards high achievement and stronger civic engagement; it does not represent typical universities by Canadian standards because of their ethno-cultural background; and the study examines the short-term impact (within 14 months of high school graduation), thus findings cannot be generalized to the long term.

Apparatus and data analysis procedures

A 98-question online opinion survey was administered to students, who answered questions regarding their attitude towards society, helping others, and volunteering; the nature and amount of previous volunteering; current service involvement; and other demographic measures of civic and political engagement.

The respective Registrar's offices of the four post-secondary institutions recruited participants. An email invitation was sent to students in January and February 2007 to an online survey, taking about 15 minutes to complete. Follow-up reminders and an incentive increased participation. The survey produced 1,533 completed responses. After removing respondents who did not complete

high school in Ontario, a usable sample of 1,341 respondents was obtained.

Conscious that students have varied experiences with service, whether the program introduces high school students to community service who would not otherwise be first examined. Students were asked how much of their community service in high school was done to satisfy their graduation requirement in order to categorize the students into three groupings based on how much more service was done outside the high school requirement. A frequency analysis of the responses to this question was conducted.

To determine whether students consider their mandatory community service requirement to be meaningful, an Index of Meaningfulness (IOM) scale was constructed. Students responded to statements related to their service by indicating their agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5). This 6-item scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.852, indicating adequate internal consistency. IOM scores were computed by averaging the responses on 6 items. The scores ranged from 1 indicating a less meaningful and possible negative community service experience, to 5 indicating a more meaningful and positive experience.

An Index of Subsequent Involvement (ISS) was created to explore statements related to whether they would become involved in service to the community in the future. Participants responded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5). The 6-item scale had a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.902, indicating adequate internal consistency. ISS scale scores were computed by averaging responses to the 6 items. These scores range from 1 to 5 and are reverse scaled so that 1 indicates a low likelihood of

future service, and 5 indicates a stronger commitment to future community service.

A one-way Analysis of Variance was conducted with the index of meaningfulness as the dependent variable and the groups of students defined by the amount of service as the independent variable to determine whether the amount of service is related to a more meaningful experience. Lastly, a one-way ANOVA was conducted based on the survey question “in which sector did you complete your requirement?” with the dependent variable being the Index of Meaningfulness. To determine whether other factors contribute to subsequent service, predictors such as frequency in attending religious services, gender, parental involvement in community service, the category of high school students graduated from (i.e. private, public, catholic), whether they were born in Canada, the population of the community in which they lived most of their lives, and total family income were identified and a multiple regression analysis was conducted.

Results

1. Do students consider their mandated community service to be meaningful?

A One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) evaluated the relationship between meaningfulness of the volunteer experience and group membership. The independent variable, group, had the three levels of service, based on number of completed hours, and coded as Group 1, 2 and 3. The dependent variable was how much they perceived their service to be meaningful. The results of the One-Way ANOVA were significant, $F(2, 1334) = 14.495, p < .001$, with moderate effect size ($\eta^2 = .24$). Table 1 presents data for the three groups, with confidence intervals for the reported means.

Table 1
Meaningfulness Index by Group based on Amount of Service

Group	N	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
				Lower	Upper
1	208	2.93	0.05	2.82	3.03
2	483	3.60	0.04	3.53	3.67
3	646	4.17	0.03	4.11	4.23

2. What is the relationship between a meaningful community service requirement and the potential for subsequent community service?

A linear regression analysis evaluated the prediction of subsequent service from a meaningful service experience during high school. The scatter plot indicated that the two variables are linearly related such that the likelihood of subsequent service increases as the meaningfulness of the service experience increases. The 95% confidence interval for the slope, 0.434 to 0.524, does not contain the value of zero, and therefore meaningful service is significantly related to the intention of subsequent community service.

The correlation between meaningful service and subsequent service was 0.50 ($p = 0.01$). Approximately 25% of the variance in subsequent service was accounted for by its linear relationship with meaningful service scores. The results of the One-Way

ANOVA, to evaluate the relationship between the types of groups and their commitment to subsequent service, were significant, $F(2, 1330) = 21.612, p < .001$, with moderate effect size ($\eta^2 = .19$) of the variance of the dependent variable.

3. What other factors are related to a meaningful experience as well as subsequent community service?

The Two-Way ANOVA, to determine whether specific sectors enabled a meaningful experience, indicated significant main effect for Sectors, $F(5, 1214) = 2.92, p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, a significant effect for Groups, $F(2, 1214) = 141.26, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .19$, and a significant interaction between the groups and sectors, $F(10, 1214) = 2.30, p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. The means and standard deviations for the Meaningfulness Index of the two factors are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Meaningfulness Index

	School	Health	NPO	Religious	Sport	Informal	Total
<40	3.00	2.91	2.68	3.12	2.97	2.95	2.92
>40	3.67	3.20	3.48	3.62	3.7	3.72	3.59
>80	4.19	4.31	4.08	4.18	4.23	3.72	4.16
Total	3.82	3.72	3.62	3.9	3.8	3.51	3.76

The results of the ANOVA, to explore the difference in meaningfulness between sectors, were not significant, $F(5, 187) = 0.975, p < 0.435$ for Group 1, with weak effect size ($\eta^2 = .025$). The results of the ANOVA for Group 2 were significant, $F(5, 446) = 3.033, p < 0.011$, with weak effect size ($\eta^2 = .033$). The results of the ANOVA for Group 3 were significant, $F(5, 581) = 3.273, p < 0.006$, with weak effect size ($\eta^2 = .027$).

Table 4 presents a summary of the multiple regression results. The linear combination of service variables was significantly related to the subsequent service index, $F(8, 999) = 54.05, p < 0.001$.

The sample multiple correlation coefficient was 0.55, indicating that approximately 30% of the variance in the subsequent service index can be accounted for by the linear combinations of subsequent service variables.

The results suggest that from among the 8 potential variables, the strongest predictor was the Meaningfulness Index ($\beta = .46$), followed by parent involvement ($\beta = -.12$), gender ($\beta = .10$), and attendance of religious services ($\beta = .08$). In contrast, the remaining variables were not statistically significant predictors in determining subsequent service.

Table 3

Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Subsequent Service

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Category of High School Graduation	0.02	0.04	0.01
Parent's Total Income 2005	-0.02	0.01	-0.04
Population of Community Lived In	0.00	0.01	0.00
Whether they Were Born in Canada	0.10	0.08	0.04
Attendance in Religious Services	0.04	0.02	0.08**
Gender	0.19	0.05	0.10*
Parental Involvement in Service	-0.21	0.05	-0.12*
Meaningfulness Index	0.46	0.03	0.46*

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .005$

Discussion

The number of students engaged in service for the first time through the mandated program (15%) is much smaller than those with previous experience (85%). Students who completed only the mandated 40 hours of service were the least satisfied with their experience, while those who served more than required felt it was more meaningful. It could be argued that students were the least satisfied were for reasons other than that the service was mandated. From this study, there is no evidence that making service mandatory will foster a commitment to service over the long term.

Forty-eight percent of the students did well beyond the required 40 hours, indicating that young people are more involved in community life than is often assumed and is consistent with the national survey conducted by Hall et al. (2009).

Those with the largest amount of service (Group 3) were more likely to cite a positive experience. Some possible explanations are that meaningful nature of the service motivates the student to continue; meaningful service opportunities often require a longer commitment; and that students who are more inclined to volunteer

had connections to placements that they found meaningful.

As indicated, there is a moderate correlation between whether students consider their experience meaningful and whether they are committed to future service. This supports the central argument that meaningful service opportunities can foster greater likelihood for subsequent service and supports earlier research that asserts that a positive experience will likely result in further commitment to service in the future (Brown et al., 2007).

There was also a correlation between the three groups and their potential for subsequent service. Group 3 was most likely to commit to future service, while group 1 was least likely to do so. The results, consistent with previous research, demonstrate that the mandated program does little to help students commit to future community service (Padanyi et al., 2010). Students who were most likely engaged in service beyond high school were those who would volunteer even if they were not required to.

The experience of students within different service sectors varied according to the three groups that they were in. For group 1, there was no relationship between the sector and whether the service was considered meaningful. For group 2, the health sector did not provide as meaningful of an experience as the sports and school sectors, and for group 3, health, school, religious and cultural sectors were all more meaningful than informal service. Although not a focus of this present study, an area of future research could be what sectors enable a meaningful experience for youth and why. If meaningful placements are a factor in subsequent community service, more research could determine where in the social economy and volunteer sector one might gain such experience and to find those attributes that make service meaningful. In

this regard, schools could strengthen collaborations with organizations whose mandate and approach demonstrate potential for meaningful placements for students. This has implications for volunteer and school administrators.

Volunteer administrators from agencies, particularly those who operate within the neighborhood where the school is situated, can create mutually reinforcing partnerships with schools and classrooms. Students meet their service requirements, while at the same time volunteer practitioners work with students to create projects and opportunities for action, providing close support outside of the classroom. For volunteer administrators to create a meaningful placement, the data results suggest that it is important for the student to feel connected to the organization they serve with, to have the opportunity to learn new skills and for them to feel that their contribution makes a difference.

This process of meaningful learning can be strengthened when teachers encourage linkages between community service and the concepts or capacities learned in school. Students can draw from their volunteer experience to better understand and articulate themes explored in history, social studies or science classes. Exploring volunteer experience in the classroom provides an opportunity for students to describe and reflect on action in order to be conscious of the meaning of their experience.

Lastly, the regression analysis reveals that the quality of the service experience, gender, attendance in religious services and parental involvement are predictors for intentions to serve in the future, with meaningful service as the strongest predictor statistically. The variables related to family income, immigration, size of community the students were raised in and the type of high school

were not statistically significant predictors. This finding is noteworthy because it suggests that there is a potential to significantly increase the positive outcomes of community service programs by focusing on identifying what opportunities exist in the social economy for meaningful service, and by creating additional, similar opportunities for high school students. The placement and the perception of a student's volunteer work are factors that programs can address and strengthen.

Conclusion

The findings from the study reported here add to a growing body of research suggesting that solely mandating community service in high school does not increase the likelihood that students will engage in further community service (Henderson et al., 2007; Meinhard et al., 2006; Padanyi et al., 2010; Taylor & Pancer, 2007). Furthermore, the findings suggest that the critical factor in subsequent service is having a meaningful experience. The implications are that meaningful service in high school increases the likelihood of subsequent service or volunteering. Understanding exactly what contributes to meaningful service in high school seems of importance for future research. The research findings begin to address this issue by examining the relationship between sector and subsequent service as well as characteristics such as religion and family income and subsequent service. Additional research is needed, potentially utilizing qualitative methodologies and a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of the volunteer.

References

Brown, S. D., Pancer, S. M., Henderson, A., & Ellis-Hale, K. (2007). The impact of high school mandatory

community service programs on subsequent volunteering and civic engagement. Report prepared for the Knowledge Development Centre, Imagine Canada. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University.

Febbraro, A. (2001). *Encouraging volunteering among Ontario youth*. Retrieved from http://www.donetbenevolat.ca/files/giving/en/rp_1997_ontario_youth_en.pdf

Gallant, K., Smale, B., & Arai, S. (2010). Civic Engagement Through Mandatory Community Service: Implications of Serious Leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 42 (2), 181-201.

Hall, M., Lasby, D., Ayer, S., & Gibbons, W. D. (2009). *Caring Canadians, involved Canadians: Highlights from the 2007 Canada survey of giving, volunteering and participating*. Ottawa, Canada: Ministry of Industry. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/71-542-x/71-542-x2009001-eng.pdf>

Henderson, A., Brown, S. D., Pancer, S. M., & Ellis-Hale, K. (2007). Mandated community service in high school and subsequent civic engagement: The case of the 'double cohort' in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 36(7), 849-60.

McLellan, J. A., & Youniss, J. (2003). Two systems of youth services: determinants of voluntary and required youth community service. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32(1), 47-58.

Meinhard, A. G., & Foster, M. K. (1999). *The impact of community service programs on students in Toronto's secondary schools*. Presented at the annual conference of the Association

- for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action, Washington, D.C.
- Meinhard, A., Foster, M., & Wright, P. (2006). Rethinking school-based community Service: The importance of a structured program. *The Philanthropist* 20(1), 5-22.
- Metz, E., McLellan, J., & Youniss, J. (2003). Types of Voluntary Service and Adolescents' Civic Development. *Catholic University Journal of Adolescent Research*, 18(2), 188-203.
- Metz, E., & Youniss, J. (2003). A demonstration that school-based required service does not deter—but heightens—volunteerism. *Political Science and Politics*, 36, 281-286.
- Metz, E., & Youniss, J. (2005). Longitudinal gains in civic development through school-based required service. *Political Psychology*, 26(3), 413-437.
- Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Ontario secondary school diploma requirement: Community involvement activities in English-language schools*. Policy/ Program Memorandum No. 124a. Ontario Ministry of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/124a.html>
- Padanyi, P., Baetz, M., Brown, S. D., & Henderson, A. (2010). Mandatory high school community service in Ontario: Assessing and improving its impact. In L. Mook, J. Quarter & S. Ryan (Eds.), *Researching the social economy* (pp. 176-200). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Planty, M., Bozick, R., & Regnier, B. (2006). Helping because you have to or helping because you want to? Sustaining participation in service work from adolescence through young adulthood. *Youth & Society*, 38(2), 177-202.
- Stukas, A., Snyder, M., & Clary, E. (1999). The effects of “mandatory volunteerism” on intentions to volunteer. *Psychological Science*, 10(1), 59-64.
- Taylor, T. P., & Pancer, S. M., (2007). Community service experiences and commitment to volunteering. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 37(2), 320-345.

About the Author

Hoda Farahmandpour earned an MA in Adult Education and Community Development from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She founded Wordswell Association for Community Learning, a non-profit organization that empowers young people to develop the capacities needed to contribute to the betterment of their communities. Her research interests include volunteering, youth development and social change.