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Making a Difference in a Day: An Assessment of "Join Hands Day"

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Abstract

The authors surveyed participants in an annual intergenerational episodic volunteerism program called Join Hands Day (JHD) that endeavors to bring youth and adults together through meaningful volunteer activity. Findings suggested that effective intergenerational community service programs must be generational partnerships that offer opportunities for common, valued contributions, balanced relationships between young and old participants, preparation and support for all participants, and opportunities for reflection.

Key words:

episodic, volunteerism, community service, intergenerational

National days of service have become a common means for mobilizing resources around important causes and symbols and for building an ethic of volunteering across America. The Corporation for National and Community Service, Points of Light Foundation, Volunteer Center National

Network, Youth Service America, and USA Freedom Corps are among the organizations sponsoring at least five national days of service, among them Martin Luther King Day, Make a Difference Day and, most recently, One Day's Pay. Although national days of service have become quite common,

they have seldom been systematically evaluated. This study begins to fill that gap by assessing the effects of "Join Hands Day" (Join Hands Day, 2002, 2005), a national day of service that endeavors to bring youth and adults together through meaningful volunteer activity. JHD began in 2000, and addresses some of the challenges of an age-segregated society by encouraging youth and adults to join in an annual day of service. JHD is a collaboration among Join Hands Day, Inc., a 501(c)3 established by America's fraternal benefit societies, the Points of Light Foundation, and the Volunteer Center National Network.

The Impetus for JHD

The rationale for initiating JHD rests with two different sets of circumstances. The first set of circumstances involves perceived estrangement between young people and adults. Although generational differences are an accepted rite of passage, the perceived gulf between generations appears to have grown. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) report that American teenagers, on average, spend 20% of their waking time—three and a half hours each day—alone. This is more time than spent with family and friends. Furthermore, the amount of time teenagers spend alone increases as they progress from middle to high school. Schneider and Stevenson attribute the large amount of time that teenagers spend alone to major demographic changes like declining family size and increasing divorce rates. Putnam (2000) goes as far as to suggest that increasing suicide and depression among young people is a product of the social isolation that Schneider and Stevenson document.

A second set of circumstances involves a decline in membership in America's fraternal benefit societies. These societies, which were founded in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, have been at the core of America's social capital for the last century. As Putnam (2000), Skocpol (2003), and others have shown, however, their membership has been growing older and gradually declining since the 1960s.

These circumstances brought the leadership of the National Fraternal Congress of America to create the JHD organization in 1998. This new 501(c)3 joined with the Points of Light Foundation and Volunteer Center National Network to initiate a national day of service in 2000.

Best Practices

When JHD was created, the authors reviewed research on youth-adult partnerships to identify best practices applicable to assessing JHD's effectiveness. The review suggested that several factors must be present for interaction among age groups to result in positive attitude development. Simply putting mixed age groups together in a social setting is insufficient to ensure positive intergenerational results. The experience should be rewarding for both age groups, fostering interaction where both groups are involved in meaningful goal setting and participation (Aday, Sims, McDuffie, & Evans, 1996). JHD was conceived as a way to encourage intergenerational interaction, "adding a community service component to intergenerational programs [that] can benefit the participants, achieve the goals of breaking down generational barriers, and enrich society as a whole" (Perry, Littlepage, & York, 2000, p. 9).

Table 1

Level of Youth and Adult Involvement in Planning JHD in 2003

| How involved were you in planning for the event | Percent of Youth | Percent of Adults |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|
| Very involved | 24 (22 in 2002) | 36 41 in 2002) |
| Somewhat involved | 24 | 25 |
| Slightly involved | 15 | 11 |
| Not involved | 37 (36 in 2002) | 28 (35 in 2002) |

Source: (Christensen et al., 2003, p. 22)

Research by Scannell and Roberts (1994) suggested that effective intergenerational community service programs are characterized by several attributes:

- *Reciprocity.* There should be a balanced relationship among young and old participants with the relationship clearly stated, planned and incorporated in the goals and activities of the program.
- *Common, valued contribution.* Young and old should work together to get things done that are valued in their community.
- *Reflection.* There should be a planned program activity where participants examine the value of the service and the intergenerational relationships.
- *Partnerships.* Both groups should have a shared vision of how the community will benefit, build on existing relationships and resources, and collaborate with a variety of community groups.
- *Preparation and Support.* High value should be placed on supporting both younger and older participants, and involving them in the activity's preparation.

Goals and Logic Models

With these practices in mind, JHD's founders articulated several goals for which logic models were

created to support evaluation of JHD. The JHD Steering Committee articulated the following long-term goals:

- Make a contribution to solving the problem of America being an age-segregated society.
- Address problem conditions in local neighborhoods.
- Increase the visibility and public awareness of fraternal benefit societies.
- Reenergize local lodges by increasing membership and participation in local chapters or lodges, particularly among young people.

The logic models created for each goal included the background factors, program activities, and immediate and intermediate outcomes. The models have guided JHD's development, specifying criteria to gauge success.

Assessment: Survey Methods

To assess progress relative to the program components outlined in the logic models, the authors administered a national participant survey each year from 2001-2004. The present study uses only results from the 2001, 2002, and 2003 surveys. For each year, the survey was usually administered by project manager volunteers immediately after a service project was completed, but

participants also had opportunities to complete a web-based or downloadable survey instrument.

The questionnaire probes the respective experiences of youth and adults with Join Hands Day and compares perceptions across generations. The forty-seven questions on the survey assess the perceived presence of best practices, components of the logic model, and respondent demographics. The survey also probes program outcomes or impacts.

Twelve thousand surveys were distributed in 2001 and 2002 to service project managers, parent fraternal organizations, or volunteer centers. In 2001, a total of 1,560 completed participant surveys were returned: in 2002, a total of 2,520 completed participant surveys were returned. Based on these figures, and on the assumption that project managers distributed all the surveys to participants, we estimate response rates of 13% and 21% respectively. These estimates likely understate response rates because some surveys were probably not distributed. In 2003, the authors distributed 15,000 surveys, with an estimated response rate of 17%. In 2002 and 2003, respondents were given an opportunity to participate in a draw for a cash incentive if their response was received by a specified date and they provided their contact information. The cash incentive appears to account for increased response rates in 2002 and 2003.

In 2002 and 2003, the authors also resurveyed participants who had responded the previous year, to determine if their attitudes had changed over time and if they had participated in JHD again. For example, in 2002, over 1,300 surveys were sent to those who had returned a survey in 2001 and

provided a mailing address. In 2003, approximately 2,300 surveys were sent to 2002 participants. These follow-up surveys yielded 21% and 23% response rates, respectively.

Analyses

The analyses presented here report selected findings from (a) the annual survey, 2001-2003, and (b) the follow-up survey, 2002-2003. The former is organized by the four long-term goals that serve as the bases for the JHD program logic model.

Annual Survey

Surveys distributed annually were analyzed to assess the presence and effects of best practices.

Encourage youth-adult partnerships. In each annual survey, the perceived extent of youth-adult partnership was measured. One of the best indicators of this partnership is evident in examining the planning stage. Youth and adult respondents were asked how involved they felt in planning the service project in which they participated. The results from 2003 reported in Table 1 are consistent with the results in 2001 and 2002. We note that variations in youth and adult responses are statistically different; adults are more likely to be involved in planning than are youth.

Level of involvement has significant consequences for JHD's impact. Youth respondents who felt more involved in the planning process were more likely to positively alter their perceptions of adults (see Table 2) across all five survey items used to measure youth attitudes toward adults. For example, youth more involved in planning were more likely to reexamine their perceptions of adults and better

appreciate adults in the days following the JHD. These findings confirm other research on youth voluntarism. In a nonintergenerational setting, Handy and Keil (2001) demonstrated the importance of youth involvement—in their case as peer volunteer leaders and managers—for positive volunteer outcomes.

Involvement in planning also had a significant impact on adult attitudes

toward youth. Adults more involved in planning were more likely to positively and significantly alter their perceptions of youth (see Table 3) on five measures of adult attitudes toward youth. For example, those adults very involved in the planning process were much more likely to come away from the service project believing that they learned a lot about young people.

Table 2
Effects of Planning on Youth Attitudes Toward Adults, 2002

| | Percent of youth respondents <u>not at all involved</u> in planning who strongly agreed/agreed | Percent of youth respondents <u>very involved</u> in planning who strongly agreed/agreed |
|---|--|--|
| I learned a lot about adults from my participation in JHD* | 53 | 69 |
| Because of JHD, I reexamined my beliefs and attitudes about adults* | 40 | 61 |
| My experiences with JHD helped me to better appreciate adults* | 52 | 69 |
| JHD helped me understand the challenges of being an adult* | 45 | 71 |
| After JHD, I realized that adults value young people more than I thought* | 52 | 72 |

*All five differences are statistically different at the 0.05 level

Source: (Littlepage et al., 2002, p. 12)

Table 3
Effects of Planning on Adult Attitudes Toward Youth, 2002

| | Percent of adult respondents <u>not at all involved</u> in planning who strongly agreed/agreed | Percent of adult respondents <u>very involved</u> in planning who strongly agreed/agreed |
|---|--|--|
| I learned a lot about young people from my participation in JHD* | 46 | 73 |
| Because of JHD, I reexamined my beliefs and attitudes about young people* | 33 | 56 |
| My experiences with JHD helped me to better appreciate young people* | 54 | 77 |
| JHD helped me understand the challenges of being young* | 39 | 65 |
| After JHD, I realize that young people are more responsible than I thought* | 52 | 72 |

*all five differences are statistically different at the 0.05 level

Source: (Littlepage et al., 2002, p. 12)

The mutual benefit of involvement in planning is reflected in respondents' observations. As one youth respondent noted in 2002, "The planning process that included three generations truly opened my eyes up to the fact that all ages of people have significant contributions and are equally important" (Littlepage, Jones, Perry, & Christensen, 2002, p. 12). Again, in 2003 a participant observed that "much work went into organizing, planning, and carrying out this project, but it was very gratifying to see adults and young people joining hands and working side-by-side to improve their community. I feel like the project was a great success" (Christensen, Littlepage, Perry, & Linders, 2003, p. 28).

In addition to joint planning and preparation, a formal opportunity to reflect about community service experiences is recommended for effective intergenerational programs (Scannell & Roberts, 1994). Reflection provides an opportunity to reinforce lessons from JHD projects. Reflection is recommended as a planned program activity where participants examine the value of the service and the intergenerational relationships at the event. Table 4 shows that most respondents reported time for reflection in conjunction with their service. When respondents were asked how strongly they felt that they had a chance to discuss the service they did with others, 68% of adults and 53% of youth responded, "A great deal." In general, adults were more likely to have spent time reflecting on their service. The proportions of both adults and youth reporting that they took time to reflect on their service increased each year from 2001 to 2003. This could again reflect learning and improvements

in service program execution as JHD matured.

Table 4
Comparisons Between Youth and Adults of Perceived Time for Reflection, 2003

Percent who strongly agreed that they had time to reflect upon their service experience

| Year | Youth | Adults |
|------|-------|--------|
| 2003 | 53 | 68 |
| 2002 | 47 | 64 |
| 2001 | 38 | 46 |

Source: (Christensen et al., 2003, p. 14)

In summary terms, Join Hands Day appears to foster a desire for more intergenerational experiences among respondents. Table 5 shows that about half the youth and adult respondents were strongly interested in being involved in more intergenerational events. The large increase in desire for intergenerational experiences from 2001 to 2002 also suggests that learning about programming for service events may have occurred, which improved intergenerational results.

Table 5
Percentages of Youth and Adults Who Expressed Strong Desire for More Intergenerational Experiences After Participating in JHD

Percent who strongly agreed to "wanting to be part of more events involving youth and adults"

| Year | Youth | Adults |
|------|-------|--------|
| 2003 | 55 | 60 |
| 2002 | 55 | 57 |
| 2001 | 46 | 43 |

Source: (Christensen et al., 2003, p. 28)

Address problem conditions in neighborhoods and communities. Our analyses of participant activities indicate that JHD is addressing neighborhood and

community problems. If the tasks of cleaning trails, riverbanks, or parks are combined with planting trees, bushes, or flowers into one category, 46% of the survey respondents in 2003 and 44% in 2002 participated in environmental activities. The second most common activity in 2002 (29%) and 2003 (22%) was helping sick, elderly, or homeless people.

By 2002, JHD had reached every state in the continental United States and Alaska and Hawaii, bringing thousands of youth and adults together in their neighborhoods and communities. These projects were primarily sponsored by fraternal benefit societies, but non-fraternal organizations such as volunteer centers also sponsored many projects.

Encourage fraternal membership and increase visibility of fraternal benefit societies. In his description of America's declining social capital, Putnam (2000) attributes part of the decline to the decreasing number of fraternal benefit societies. As significant sponsors of JHD, fraternal benefit societies hope to introduce individuals, particularly potential younger members, to the benefits of fraternalism.

The 2003 survey allowed us to gauge whether fraternal chapters sponsoring JHD benefited from increased exposure. We asked participants if they knew who was sponsoring the event. As expected, more adults than youth knew the sponsoring organization. In 2003, a total of 94% of adults and 84% of youth knew who was sponsoring the event. If we look at fraternally-sponsored projects only, 91% of the respondents who said they were not members of a fraternal benefit society knew who sponsored the event (Christensen et al., 2003). This indicates that JHD is a venue that continues to raise awareness about fraternalism among nonmembers, including young people.

With an understanding that JHD can encourage new membership among young nonmembers and reinforce commitments among young members, our 2003 analysis affirms JHD's potential. Seventy percent of young nonmembers are very willing to attend future fraternally-sponsored events (see Table 6), and 23% are somewhat willing. Among young, fraternal members, 84% are very willing to attend future fraternal events (see Table 6), and 15% are somewhat willing.

Table 6
Willingness of 2003 JHD Respondents to Attend Future Fraternal Events

| Percent of Respondent Type | Very Willing | Somewhat Willing | Not at All Willing | Not Sure | Total |
|----------------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|----------|-------|
| Fraternal Youth | 83.6 | 14.7 | 0.9 | 0.9 | 100 |
| Non-fraternal Youth | 69.9 | 22.79 | 0.0 | 7.4 | 100 |
| Fraternal Adult | 88.3 | 10.59 | 0.0 | 1.3 | 100 |
| Non-fraternal Adult | 72.0 | 23.4 | 0.5 | 4.1 | 100 |

Source: (Christensen et al., 2003, p. 14).

Follow-up Survey

As part of an effort to understand longer-term impacts of episodic service, we surveyed past participants a year after their JHD experience to assess outcomes relative to JHD's goals. Among the respondents to the 2002 follow-up survey who participated in 2001, 62% participated again in 2002 (Littlepage et al., 2002). Among the respondents to the 2003 follow-up survey, of those who participated in 2002, 45% participated again in 2003 (Christensen et al., 2003). We found, as would be expected, that being a member of a fraternal benefit society is associated positively with repeat participation. For example, of those respondents who participated in 2002 and 2003 consecutively, 81% were fraternal members. Of those who participated in 2002 only, 61% were fraternal members. This may suggest that affiliation with an institution supporting JHD is important to encourage continuing, individual participation.

We also found that age is significantly related (at the .05 level) to repeat participation—repeat participation is more closely associated with older volunteers than with younger volunteers (there is a higher mean age among repeat volunteers). Of those who participated both years, 15% were young adults and 85% were adults. Among those respondents who participated only in 2002, 23% were young adults and 77% were adults.

Table 7 illustrates potential lasting effects from JHD. We note that the comparison groups - the non-follow-up 2003 respondents and those who participated in 2002, but not in 2003 - had very high cross-generational perceptual responses. However, those who participated in 2002 and 2003 had statistical-higher responses. This suggests that while one-time participation in JHD may lead to lasting, cross-generational perceptual changes, repeat participation is even more likely to be associated with change.

Table 7
Attitudes Toward Intergenerational Relationships and Variations between Repeat and Non-repeat Participants, 2003

| Statement | Percent Who Agreed/Strongly Agreed with Statement | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | General Respondents in 2003 (baseline) | Follow-up Respondents (<i>not participating</i> in 2003) | Follow-up Respondents (<i>participating</i> in 2003) |
| Teams with both younger and older people can be fun* | 96 | 96 | 99 |
| It is important that both older and younger people take time to understand each other | 97 | 97 | 99 |

*statistical difference among means at the .05 level among the follow-up populations (right two columns)

Source: (Christensen et al., 2003, p. 26)

Among those who participated in 2002 and 2003, almost all (99.5%) agreed/strongly agreed that they are "comfortable interacting with people of a different generation. Among those who participated only in 2002, this figure was 98%. The mean differences between the two groups' responses are statistically different (at the .01 level), with the mean response being more positive among those who participated in 2002 and 2003. This finding also suggests that participation in JHD the previous year is associated with more positive perceptions of cross-generational interaction.

Conclusions

Join Hands Day is an experiment in how episodic community service can be used to solve serious social problems. JHD was designed to address two primary problems, one involving the social isolation of young people from adults and the other the aging and declining membership of fraternal benefit societies. Survey data gathered and analyzed from 2001-2003 participants suggests that JHD has had some success in addressing the twin concerns that motivated the creation of this annual day of service.

JHD is also a microcosm of the proliferation of social innovation in America resulting from the search for new institutions to repair eroding social capital. America's fraternal benefit societies hope to make connections to youth who, in turn, will help the societies to rejuvenate themselves and restore their roles as important threads in the fabric of our communities.

The results of our research reinforce program design guidance based upon previous research and practice (Scannell and Roberts, 1994). Effective

intergenerational community service programs must be generational partnerships that offer opportunities for common, valued contributions, balanced relationships between young and old participants, preparation and support for all participants, and opportunities for reflection.

Perhaps our most significant practical finding is that not all projects were equally successful in eliciting common contributions from youth and adults. Adults tended to have a larger role in planning community service projects. When implemented effectively, however, involvement in planning was a powerful tool for creating the effects the JHD founders had intended. Youth and adults involved in planning the community service activity were more likely to have positive views of the other generation as a result of their participation in JHD. Join Hands Day, Inc.'s Web site offers an online Action Guide (2005) with recommendations for developing youth-adult partnerships. Among the Guide's suggestions are hosting intergenerational icebreakers before service events, developing intergenerational listening skills, and developing self-expression skills.

The outcomes associated with JHD suggest that episodic service can be an effective tool for producing targeted change. In light of increased reliance upon episodic service as an alternative to more intense service, this is a significant finding. Although Martin Luther King Day, Make a Difference Day, and Youth Service Day are not panaceas, they may be among the tools our society can use to solve community and social problems and build solidarity across our divisions. We also found that episodic service can make a positive difference in relation to societal-level generational disconnection.

Moreover, more frequent participation in JHD leads to even more favorable cross-generational perceptions.

Finally, we note the role that service can play in promoting organizational renewal. We find some evidence that sponsoring a service day like JHD can lead to greater organization visibility and improved perceptions of the sponsoring organization.

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