

2017

## Christian Service: Learning to Serve and Serving to Learn

Bill Kuhn  
*Crown College*

Scott Moats  
*Crown College*

James Zapf  
*Crown College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd\\_growth](https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth)



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kuhn, Bill; Moats, Scott; and Zapf, James (2017) "Christian Service: Learning to Serve and Serving to Learn," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 16 : No. 16 , Article 5.

Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd\\_growth/vol16/iss16/5](https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol16/iss16/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact [pillars@taylor.edu](mailto:pillars@taylor.edu).



# Christian Service: Learning to Serve and Serving to Learn

Bill Kuhn, Ed.D.  
Scott Moats, Ph.D.  
James Zapf, Ph.D.

Crown College

48

## Abstract

Small, private higher educational institutions have played a significant role in American society. Historically, these institutions have emphasized the role of teaching and service. With this in mind, this article reports on the effects of service-learning embedded in an existing course at an institution with an extensive co-curricular service-learning program. This research reveals the results of a creative partnership between Student Development leadership and faculty to investigate the effects of service-learning on students when embedded in an existing class. Using in-depth interviews, the researchers seek to discover the student experience of making a co-curricular program curricular. Results indicate students showed an increase in leadership capacity and professional affinity. This study indicates there is promise to embedding service-learning projects in existing course work. While this endeavor creates additional work for Student Development professionals and faculty, the additional work appears to enrich the student experience.

*Keywords: service-learning, Christian service, student experience*

## Introduction

Much has been written about service-learning and its effects (Brandell & Hinck, 1997; Eyer & Giles, 1996; Giles & Eyer, 1998; Kendrick, 1996; Markus, Howard & King, 1993; Myers-Lipton, 1996; and Shumer & Belbas, 1996). However, not much attention is devoted to service-learning in a context where it has been historically a part of an institution's culture for almost 100 years.

Small, private colleges have played a historic and critical role in American higher education in the past 300-plus years. However, today the very essence of these unique institutions is being threatened in the changing and complex higher education landscape. While these colleges pursue their specific mission, their leadership is struggling to find relevant research, practical advice, and educated individuals that are trained in culturally relevant tactics to sustain institutional health.

This study provides one component of a foundational research base in the differences between small, private institutions and large, public institutions. The Research I institution in higher education is the most studied institutional set in America. However, there are a greater number of small, private institutions that have not been studied at the same level. The educated professor and administrator, in order to apply the research to his or her institution, must do an "institutional hermeneutic." This study is one attempt to do an institutional hermeneutic with the well-known concept of Christian Service. Christian service at many small, historically faith-based colleges have been doing service components since their beginnings. However, not much research has been done on the impact upon students when Christian service is embedded into a student's academic coursework. It is the hope of the researchers that this study will generate interest and more studies on the benefits and detractions of embedding Christian Service expectations and requirements into existing courses.

## Literature Review

Christian Service has been a foundational component of the American Bible College movement since its early beginnings (Hunt & Carper, 1996). The foundation for today's service-learning was evident in some of the earliest American educational institutions. However, the debate on the value of Christian Service, more commonly called service-learning, in the academic classroom continues. The debate centers on several different themes. For this review, three areas will be addressed, finally centering on one area that will focus the study. The three areas that will be briefly addressed are: benefits to the students, benefits to the faculty member, and benefits to the course

outcomes. Admittedly, the categories are not mutually exclusive, but the framework provides a structure for the literature review.

### Benefits to the Students

Strage (2000) suggests that “Participation in service-learning experiences has been demonstrated to benefit students in several important ways” (p. 50). The documented benefits that have been discussed include a greater student awareness of their civic responsibilities (Brandell & Hinck, 1997; Eyler & Giles, 1996; Giles & Eyler, 1998; Kendrick, 1996; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Myers-Lipton, 1996; and Shumer & Belbas, 1996). With regard to internal enhancement, studies have shown that students’ moral, cognitive, and emotional development have been positively affected by completing service projects (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kendrick, 1996; Ostrow, 1995, Rhoads, 1997).

Other internal enhancements have come in the area of commitment to the academic process (Sax & Astin, 1997) and greater critical thinking skills (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

### Benefits to the Faculty

Hammond (1994) conducted a study of 130 faculty members in Michigan. One reported finding suggested that faculty believed that service-learning clearly represented their discipline, enhanced students’ critical thinking, and helped in self-motivation. Hesser (1995) reported that faculty believed that service-learning projects enhanced students’ written communicative skills and students’ course concept recognition. Faculty from the Hesser study also reported that the quality of learning increased. However, there was not much definition surrounding the operationalization of the concept.

### Benefits to Course Outcomes

While the literature is plentiful on the benefits of course outcomes, it is also mixed. Based on an analysis of course grades, Kendrick (1996) suggested no measurable difference in course grades. Others like Sugar and Livosky (1998) reported a slightly higher final course grade in Child Development for students who self-selected a service-learning option. However, Shastri (1999) documented that the course grades in a Foundations of Education course were not different. She did report an increase in engagement among some assignments that required student reflection. Markus, Howard, and King (1993) reported specific differences on what students believed they had learned in the course, specifically on whether they felt like they performed to their potential.

In this study, the researchers are primarily interested in what student impacts are realized when a service-learning component is attached to a class. The researchers are seeking a greater understanding of the experience of students by embedding service-learning components into existing classes.

### Methods

This study specifically sets out to discover the experience of students when Christian Service projects are embedded in existing college classes. In the context of this research, Christian Service projects run parallel to the curriculum. Christian service is administered by Student Development staff with little input or intersection with college faculty. Students are required to complete Christian Service credits in order to graduate. However, some students never connect their Christian Service obligations with their chosen field. This experiment sets out to combine the two curricula to see if there are enhanced benefits. Specifically, the research question that guides this study is: What are the experiences of students when Christian Service projects are embedded into existing classes?

### Definition of Variable

For this study, “Christian Service” is used interchangeably with “service-learning.” The researchers believe that there are nuances between the two; however, for the purpose of this study, the nuances are non-material. Therefore, service-learning is being defined as field-based application of the material being discussed in class. The field-based work in this case was closely tied to the course calendar as well as the course outcomes.

### Study Setting

This study is situated in a small, Midwestern, private institution belonging to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). This institution is small and informal (i.e. administration is flat with little designation between faculty, staff, and administration). The students are typically first-generation college students from smaller communities. Christian Service is offered out of Student Development and is required for graduation.

### Data Collection and Methodological Approach

Qualitative research provides a lens whereby researchers can distill core benefits of the service-learning experience in the lives of the students. In this case, in-depth interviews were conducted with each of the six students. An interview protocol was developed in consultation with relevant literature and stated research goals. The protocol was reviewed by a panel of experts for construct validity. Individual interviews were recorded and careful

interviewer notes were taken. Confidentiality was preserved by using student-selected pseudonyms throughout the research and report. A constant comparative model of analysis of both the notes and recordings was pursued providing an iterative process of data review. Comparing interview notes with recorded interviews, the researchers catalogued repeated words and ideas. These words and ideas were then clustered into themes to form constructs and relationships of ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). These constructs were then compared to relevant literature to confirm research validity. This research design generates reliable themes in keeping with standard qualitative research practices (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006).

### Participants

The analysis below is based, in part, on one section of students in a senior-level psychology class. The gender breakdown was primarily women (83%, n=5) with a minority of students being male (17%, n=1). The participant headcount is low due to the fact that this is an elective senior-level course for psychology majors.

### The Course

PSY 442, Marriage and Family Counseling, is a three-credit class that is offered every spring. The catalog describes the course as, “[a] course [that] provides an overview of key theories in marital and family therapy along with an introduction to techniques used in marital and family counseling. Students will develop an integrationist approach to marriage and family counseling. Prerequisite PSY 330” (College Catalog, p. 186).

The course met three times each week for 50 minutes. It was a typical class with tests and assignments that followed along with a published textbook. For the spring 2013 class, a field component (service-learning) was introduced to the students. While participation was optional, everyone in the class volunteered to be in the study and chose the service-learning option.

The service-learning component was fully integrated into the course. The service-learning assignments were based on fieldwork. Students were assigned a group and a community family. Each assignment was built upon what was being taught in the class. Once the students were introduced to the textbook material, they followed up that week with testing the theories in the field with an assigned family. Families were specifically chosen based on a willingness to participate. The specific field-based assignments were collected and used to calculate final grades for the class. It should be noted that students were not providing clinical counseling services to the families, as this would not be within their scope of practice as undergraduate psychology students.

## Results

The research question is: What are the experiences of students when Christian Service projects are embedded into existing classes? The research interviews generated core themes outlined according to (a) personal development, (b) class engagement, (c) professional development, and (d) project process and motivation. These categories provide the researchers a lens from which to assess the liabilities and benefits of embedding the service-learning into existing classes. Participant quotes are provided in order to capture the language and authenticity of the student voice.

### Personal Development

**Personal disequilibrium.** All six participants referenced anxiety associated with the service-learning project. Students had to interact with community families in real-life “counseling” scenarios. This brought the students a level of uneasiness since the stakes were higher, albeit the real risks were minimal.

Pat noted the discomfort of stepping into an unfamiliar setting stating that he had to work to “overcome fears; I felt blind at first, facing unknown limits and expectations.” Anna felt the experience was “intimidating at first” but grew more excited about the experience as she had opportunity to apply the course content. Ally admitted to feeling “nervous, even resistant” to the service project, but had a “conquering feeling” afterward for having succeeded. The reality of serving “outside your comfort zone” (Pat) seemed to have been the catalyst for the lessons learned by students. Even if the student “felt pushed to participate since it was required of the class” (Ally), the presence of a palpable disequilibrium generated by the out-of-class experience is something difficult to impossible to manufacture in the classroom and heightened the learning considerably.

**Increased leadership capacity.** The “on-site” experiences seem to have pushed students to elevate their personal leadership capacity. Molly mentioned learning about “organizational skills and leadership” through the experience. She referenced issues such as faithfully scheduling meetings with others as a benefit. Working in pairs helped the students handle team conflict (Maria, Molly). Pat noted the practical benefits of the experiences which made [him] think about everything from personal hygiene to punctuality. “In a sense,” he said, “I felt forced to grow up; helped me mature as an adult.” Students were able to expand their self-awareness and leadership through these real-life learning opportunities.

## Class Engagement

**Integrated learning.** The opportunity to serve outside the classroom provided students with an evident association for classroom material. Students repeatedly spoke of the value of integrating classroom theories with their service. Ally stated, “[the service-learning assignment] helped me recognize and incorporate several counseling models.” Pat agreed, “[the service-learning assignments] helped synthesize theories to develop my own approach through application.” Ally felt motivated to learn the class content stating, “I was forced to take in the material knowing it was going to be used.” Molly specifically spoke about the collaboration with a peer through assignments which allowed for “honest critique” of each other following their family sessions. She felt the debriefing moments with her peer after the sessions were among the most educational components of the course. Molly simply added, “the entire experience allowed us to go deeper with experience.” Service-projects are intended to aid the learning via associational experiences. This project accomplished that educational aim well.

**Class participation.** Students indicated through the interviews that the outside-the-class experiences enriched their inside-the-class experience. Students spoke of increased attendance knowing that they were going to have to utilize counseling theories with families (Anna, Pat). Students stated that their engagement in class discussions increased due to their learning project involvement (Maria, Molly). Anna felt the project “pushed [her] to go to class and led me to take better notes.” The discussion in class was enhanced by having real-life examples to draw from. Pat declared, “I came to some ‘eureka moments’ in class discussion when I realized there were other ways to approach family issues.” Students felt the debriefing moments in class enriched their service-learning experience, helping them to make sense of the material. Thus, the class and the project complemented each other in the lives of students.

## Professional Development

**Affirmation.** Four of the six students mentioned the value of the experience as one that was affirming to their career goals. Students in this class were comprised of mostly seniors with professional aspirations on the horizon and they believed this experience re-affirmed their desire to work in the counseling field. Anna may have captured the sentiment most directly when she stated, “This project helped refine my passion for counseling.” She added that it gave her a “positive view of the future.” Paige was excited about the experience as it “affirmed that [she] want[s] to work with people in these settings.”

**Professional growth.** Students spoke about the increased professionalism born out of their field experience. Wurr & Hamilton (2012) suggest that service-learning projects help a student feel better prepared for future professions. Students indeed felt that the opportunity provided a framework for better knowledge and use of counseling skills. For example, Ally believed that over the sessions with the family, students “developed their own style of relating in a counseling session.” Similarly, Maria remarked that the experience “refined [her] counseling skills” and Paige stated, “it gave me an opportunity to explore different lenses of family counseling.” Molly felt strongly that she learned about how to conduct oneself in a professional manner in counseling settings. Students spoke about the positive benefits of the service-learning project such as ability to handle complex situations (Paige), punctuality (Pat), organization skills (Molly), leadership growth (Molly), and how to handle “conflict in the field” (Molly). These represent transferable skills that will aid the students in maturing into the professional workforce.

#### Project Process and Motivation

A word about the process of the service-learning project is in order based on student feedback. Students utilized strong language to describe their feelings to the class assignment. Despite the fact that students were told that they could opt out of the service project and signed a participation statement declaring they could discontinue at any time, two students expressed concern that they felt “pushed to do it” (Ally, Anna). Anna elaborated, “I felt like I couldn’t get out of the assignment and that created a lot of stress for me.” Ally stated that the project was a “hassle at first, like another hoop to jump through, but [she] did learn from it in the end.” Maria expressed similar thoughts saying the project “seemed like a chore [she] had to get done.” Maybe it was for such reasons that Anna felt the project was “artificial for both [her] and the family.” In addition, four out of the six students related difficulty with scheduling meetings. These comments reflect the extrinsic motivation provided by the course requirement toward the project, though alternate assignments were available for any who chose not to participate.

#### Discussion

Service-learning holds promise for students’ personal and professional growth as evidenced by student interviews and relevant literature (Schaffer, 2004). Data culled from the interviews suggest the need for further research on student motivation. Fascinatingly, the personal disequilibrium created by the service project (which often prompts intrinsic motivation) was matched

by an exposed frustration from the students toward the “required” nature of the assignment. Students were aggravated by the “hassle” of scheduling meetings with community families, and felt “pushed” into the assignment. These speak to an extrinsic motivation often viewed as a deterrent to student learning (Wlodkowski, 1999). How does a faculty member interact with the realities of scheduling conflicts and expectations in service-learning requirements to move students toward intrinsic motivation? How does the “required” status of the assignment relate to the intent of the assignment? How should a course be arranged with a service-learning component which minimizes the artificial nature of the service? In a sense, the assignment is given with the hope that it increases intrinsic motivation, say a genuine concern for others, in future settings. Yet, the convergence of factors makes student motivation for such projects slippery. This could benefit from more research.

Also, the integrational nature of service-learning toward holistic development of students urges a strong praxis model of education. Students expressed the value of class discussion to help them process their experience. Writing and videotaping sessions helped students reflect on the project. How do faculty arrange class times and assignments to aid students in reflection? To optimize student learning, students indicate a high need for reflection through discussion and faculty feedback which may cut into faculty desires for lecture. How much reflection is necessary? At what point does the class discussion reach a saturation point in which reflection is no longer profitable? Additional research could shed needed light on how to capture course time and assignments to maximize student reflection and growth.

Finally, the scheduling conflicts and required nature of the assignment created stress points for students toward the assignment. It was hoped that connecting the service-learning with upper-level course work would increase intrinsic motivation. However, student feedback does not reflect that supposition. This is a critical issue for educators seeking to enlist service-learning in classroom settings. Helping students navigate their busy schedules in order to prioritize outside-the-classroom experiences must be considered when developing such assignments. Further, one must not assume that moving the “requirement” from a non-curricular setting to a curricular context improves the student motivation for service.

### Conclusion

This study provides foundational reflections on the experience of students when service-learning is conjoined with the classroom experience. Clearly these results should not be used to derive policy for small, private institutions

that have engaged in Christian Service projects since their inception, but it does enrich the understanding of how service-learning opportunities linked with academic courses can impact the student. Student Development professionals should seek creative partnerships with faculty to align Christian Service requirements with course offerings.

One may speculate about the effectiveness of a Christian Service program that does not build on a student's interests or developmental needs. It would appear from this study that using a student's curricular program as a foundation for service-learning brings certain benefits to the student, namely, its potential to confirm (or disconfirm) a student's choice of profession, its effects on personal and professional development, and the potential for increased academic engagement. The creation of individualized or class-based service-learning projects for every student would take time and resources, but the benefits could be most profound.

## References

- Auerbach, C., & Silverstein, L. (2003). *Qualitative data: An introduction to coding and analysis*. New York: New York University Press.
- Batchelder, T., & Root, S. (1994). Effects of an undergraduate program to integrate academic learning and service: Cognitive and identity outcomes. *Journal of Adolescence*, 17, 341-356.
- Brandell, M., & Hinck, S. (1997). Service-learning: Connecting citizenship with the classroom. *NASSP Bulletin*, 81(591), 49-56. *Crown college catalog*. (2013). St. Bonifacius, MN: Crown College. DOI: www.crown.edu.
- Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches*. Lincoln, NE: Sage Publications.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. (1996). The impact of service-learning program characteristics on student outcomes. Snowbird, UT: Paper presented at the National Society for Experiential Education Conference.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Giles, D., & Eyler, J. (1998). A service-learning research agenda for the next five years. In R. Rhoads and J. Howard (Eds.), *Academic service-learning: A pedagogy of action and reflection* (pp. 65-72). *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 73, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Glesne, C. (2006). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (3<sup>rd</sup>. ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Hammond, G. (1994). Faculty motivation and satisfaction in *Michigan higher education*. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning*, 1, 21-28.

- Hesser, G. (1995). Outcomes attributable to service-learning and evidence of change in faculty attitudes about experiential education. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning*, 2, 33-42.
- Hunt, T., & Carper, J. (1996). *Religious higher education in the United States: A source book*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Kendrick, J. (1996). Outcomes of service-learning in an introduction to Sociology course. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning*, 3, 72-81.
- Markus, G., Howard, J., & King, D. (1993). Integrating community service and classroom instruction enhances learning. Result from an experiment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 15, 410-419.
- Myers-Lipton, S. (1996). Effects of a comprehensive service-learning program on college students' level of racism. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning*, 3, 236-242.
- Ostrow, J. (1995). Self-consciousness and social position: On college students changing their minds about the homeless. *Qualitative Sociology*, 18, 357-375.
- Rhoads, R. (1997). *Community service and higher learning: Explorations of the caring self*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Sax, L., & Astin, A. (1997). The benefits of service: Evidence from undergraduates. *Educational Record*, 78, 25-32.
- Schaffer, R. (April 2004). Service-learning in Christian higher education: Bringing our mission to life. *Christian Higher Education*, 3(2), 127-145.
- Shastri, A. (1999). *Investigating content knowledge gains in academic service-learning: A quasi-experimental study in an education psychology course*. Montreal, Canada: Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.
- Shumer, R., & Belbas, B. (1996). What we know about service-learning. *Education and Urban Society*, 28, 208-223.
- Strage, A. (2000). Service-learning: Enhancing student learning outcomes in a college-level lecture course. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning*, 5-13.
- Sugar, J., & Livosky, M. (1998). Enriching child psychology courses with preschool journal option. *Teaching of Psychology*, 15, 93-95.
- Wlodkowski, R. J. (1999). *Enhancing adult motivation to learn: a comprehensive guide for teaching all adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Wurr, A., & Hamilton, C. (2012). Leadership development in service-learning: an exploratory investigation. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 16(2), June 2012.