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Sweat the small stuff: The effect of small incentive changes on participation in service-learning

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ABSTRACT

We examine the effect of small changes in incentives on student participation in an optional service-learning component of an intermediate level economics course using a field experiment. Professors frequently encourage but do not require participation in a particular course component. Yet little rigorous analysis exists on how to best encourage students to participate. We vary the reward for completing service between two randomly assigned sections of a course with a service-learning component. Students in the higher-incentive section are significantly more likely to participate. We highlight the implications for designing courses with optional components such as optional service-learning.

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1. Introduction

Professors realize that students must be engaged in a course if they are going to be an active participant in the learning process (Fink, 2003). Prior research on incentives in college classrooms focuses on the use of grades with required components of a course such as homework problems, research papers, exams, and even effort (for example see Krohn and O'Connor, 2005; Swinton, 2007). In contrast, studies devote little attention to understanding how students respond to incentives for participation in optional course components. A professor may prefer to encourage participation in cases where it may not be feasible to require students to participate, for example to attend a special lecture or participate in service-learning outside of scheduled class time. This paper examines the

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effect of a small change in the magnitude of an incentive on students' decisions to participate in service-learning.

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse defines service-learning as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, n.d., n.p.). Service-learning provides opportunities to enhance learning by placing students into experiences where they observe, interact, and reflect on situations in the real world. Students then come to the classroom with their observations that motivate discussion and alter the traditional educational process (McGoldrick et al., 2000). For example, in the interest of boosting postsecondary students' exposure to poverty and worlds outside their own, many schools adopt courses and certificates that incorporate service-learning into the curriculum.

Little rigorous analysis exists on understanding how to best encourage students to participate. In some cases, the service is completely voluntary; in others, there are incentives to participate (i.e., extra credit); in others still service-learning is mandatory. The studies that explore the effect of different types of incentives are frequently confounded by non-random selection into incentive structures. For example, the students may have information about the structure of the incentive prior to the enrolment decision, or the studies focus on younger age groups (Kleiner and Chapman, 1999; Andersen and Murphy, 1999).

We avoid some of the selection issues prevalent in studies of service-learning due to the method of course scheduling at University A, a highly selective liberal arts university. The catalogue description informs students that the course contains an optional service-learning component. Students register for the course and then are randomly assigned to one of two sections by the registrar's office.¹ We exploit the random assignment to sections by varying the reward for completing the service across sections. The unobservable characteristics, such as internal motivation to participate in service-learning, are expected to be randomly distributed across sections. The only non-random difference between the two sections is the small difference in incentive for completing the service-learning. Therefore, the design of this study allows us to effectively address the important issue of incentives in courses using a method not previously applied in this literature.

We find that students in the higher-incentive section are significantly more likely to participate in service-learning. Therefore, professors should consider the use of small incentives to encourage participation in optional course components. While service-learning is most common at selective-liberal arts schools, professors at a more traditional state school or less-selective liberal arts school should interpret these results caution. The findings may not generalize to the different institutional setting and student characteristics. Consistent with previous work in this area, female students are significantly more likely to participate than male students in both the treatment and control groups, though both respond to the higher incentives with greater participation (Metz and Youniss, 2003; Nolin et al., 1997; Planty and Regnier, 2003).

2. Previous work

Effective teaching requires active participation by students (Siegfried et al., 1991). The use of different pedagogies within a course also accommodates the needs of students with different learning styles (Kolb, 1981; McGoldrick et al., 2000). The economics education literature establishes the effectiveness of alternative teaching methods and instructs how to implement classroom discussions, games and simulations, community-based research, cooperative learning, and service-learning (for example see Hawtrey, 2007; Lawson, 2007; Brooks and Schramm, 2007; McGoldrick et al., 2000; McGoldrick, 1998). The American Economic Association sponsors programs such as the Teaching Innovations Program (TIP) in Economics to help professors adopt new pedagogies (Becker, 1997). Despite these efforts, economics professors have been slow to respond and move away from relying primarily on traditional lecture methods (Watts and Becker, 2008). This is partly due to the fact that service-learning imposes a unique set of demands on the professor and is challenging to implement

¹ The registrar runs an algorithm to minimize conflicts with other courses and student activities such as athletics practice schedules.

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