



Mentoring as service-learning: The relationship between perceived peer support and outcomes for college women mentors[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether peer support was related to psychosocial outcomes for college women serving as youth mentors in the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP), a service-learning mentoring program. The outcomes assessed were college students' ethnocultural empathy and their sense of competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Data included questionnaires completed by YWLP mentors (YWLP; $n = 227$) and college women with (CS; $n = 230$) and without (no CS; $n = 105$) alternative community service involvement. Results showed that YWLP mentors' level of perceived peer support was associated with stronger outcomes in autonomy as compared to the CS group and in ethnocultural empathy as compared to both comparison groups. These findings extend the literature on effective support for college service-learning participants.

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1. Introduction

Colleges and universities are seen as ideal settings for service-learning programs not only because of colleges' historic commitment to promoting democratic citizenship (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010), but also because college students are in a transformative stage of cognitive, psychosocial, and identity development (McEwen, 1996), which makes them opportune candidates for the type of personal enrichment that service-learning can provide (Rhoads, 1997). Accordingly, the popularity of service-learning initiatives in colleges has increased exponentially in the past few decades (e.g., Kronick & Cunningham, 2013). Though the descriptions of service-learning are numerous and broad, Bringle and Hatcher (1995) have provided a widely accepted definition:

A course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course

content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Bringle and Steinberg (2010) have identified and defined the "civic-minded graduate" (CMG) as a university-graduate who develops the interest in and ability to collaborate with others in working toward a common good. There are several cognitive, affective, skills-based, and behavioral features that comprise the CMG and are considered central in civic education (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). Research has shown direct connections between service-learning experiences and outcomes in these domains.

For example, a study by Eyler, Giles, and Braxton (1997) found associations between service-learning participation and citizenship confidence, tolerance for others, and perceptions of social justice. Similarly, service-learning has been associated with a reduction in negative stereotypes (Eyler & Giles, 1999), more open-mindedness (Jones & Abes, 2004), and a greater understanding and awareness of others from different backgrounds (Hughes, Welsh, Mayer, Bolay, & Southard, 2009). Second, associations have also been found between service-learning and self-efficacy (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010), which has been defined as "one's belief that she or he is capable of making meaningful community service contributions" (Reeb, Folger, Langsner, Ryan, & Crouse, 2010, p. 459). For example, service-learning participation has been found to increase students' confidence in their capacity to make a difference in the community (Eyler et al., 1997; Simons & Cleary, 2006).

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Emerging literature has shown that mentoring as a service-learning experience is associated with similar gains. A qualitative study by Banks (2010) indicated that college student mentor benefits included valuing of the all-female setting, recognition of cultural dynamics, learning to negotiate group dynamics, confirmation of abilities and knowledge, and career guidance. A larger and more recent quantitative study found associations between service-learning mentoring and outcomes related to the development of civic-mindedness: civic attitudes, community service self-efficacy, self-esteem, interpersonal problem solving skills, civic action, and political awareness (Weiler et al., 2013). Despite its potential benefits, however, service-learning can be a challenging experience for college students. Students must be adequately supported in order to learn from their experience and not become overwhelmed by its associated challenges (Eyler & Giles, 1999). While faculty support has been associated with positive outcomes for students (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000), the level of support they can provide is contingent on sufficient institutional assistance (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Given the remarkable growth of university interest in service-learning programs in recent years (Campus Compact, 2011), additional ways of supporting students in their service-learning experiences while lessening their reliance on faculty would be important.

Research and theory on college student development emphasize the importance of peer support and collaboration (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007), raising the question of whether peers can effectively support each other in a structured service-learning context. In order to explore this possibility, the present study examines the relation between peer support and outcomes for college women serving as youth mentors in a service-learning mentoring program, the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP). YWLP was chosen for this study due to the combined one-to-one and group mentoring model, which provides unique opportunities for mentor collaboration and support. First, we review the literature on theoretical frameworks for understanding service-learning benefits and the value of student support, particularly in the context of mentoring. Next, YWLP's mentoring and training model is described in more detail to provide a context for the present study.

2. Background

Interpersonal relationships are an important feature of any service-learning experience (Bringle, Studer, Wilson, Clayton, & Steinberg, 2011), and they are overtly relevant in youth mentoring. Service-learners in general—and mentors in particular—often have socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds that differ from the youth they serve (Bringle et al., 2011; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007). Among the college population, this presents an opportunity for students to develop empathy, understanding, and positive feelings about individuals who are different from them, all of which are precursors of future helping and altruism and are also key features of the CMG (Bringle et al., 2011). It would be useful to assess whether service-learning mentors develop empathy as both a mentoring relationship feature and as a valuable outcome with positive implications for their civic development.

Additionally, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a useful framework for understanding the psychosocial and civic-minded outcomes of university service-learning experiences. According to SDT, humans have three basic needs—to feel competent, related, and autonomous—that are central to personal growth and the internalization of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Ryan and Deci (2000) define intrinsic motivation as, “the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn” (p. 70). Such internalized motivation is a core feature of the civic-minded graduate (CMG), as

it is the driving force between the necessary integration of one's identity, educational experiences, and civic experiences that leads to civic-mindedness (Bringle et al., 2011). When environments promote students' feelings that they can be efficacious in performing desired activities (competence) and that they have a sense of freedom in their choices and behaviors (autonomy), it sets the stage for the natural proclivity toward intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness, or a sense of belonging and security, is the third aspect of SDT that may be more distally related to intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Considering SDT and CMG theories together, competence, relatedness, and autonomy can be thought of as both a tri-fold outcome indicative of psychosocial well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and as necessary precursors to intrinsic motivation and civic development (Bringle et al., 2011). Autonomy and competence may be particularly important for intrinsic motivation. Thus, the three SDT features would be a useful gauge for assessing meaningful outcomes in student service-learners.

While service-learning programs have the potential to positively influence college student development, researchers and educators caution that simply performing service does not necessarily ensure that significant learning or beneficial outcomes will occur (Jacoby, 1996; Kendall, 1990). For example, although contact with individuals from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds can result in interpersonal growth, it can also challenge students in novel ways (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hughes et al., 2012; Kronick & Cunningham, 2013). This may be especially true when college students enter into mentoring relationships with youth. Illustrating this point, a study on a service-learning mentoring program for low-income youth showed that it was common for students to experience a state of “shock” when they first entered into the high-poverty environments in which their mentees lived (Hughes et al., 2009). For some students, initial contact with these environments can expose deep-seated negative feelings about certain cultures or socioeconomic environments (Rockqushore & Schaffer, 2000). It is important that mentors learn how to effectively navigate these differences not only for their own growth, but also because prejudicial stereotypes and deficient relational skills can cause mentoring relationship failure (Spencer, 2007), which can have a detrimental impact on vulnerable youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

In order for students to effectively manage difficult situations and to experience positive growth, service-learners' experience of challenge must be balanced by a sense of support (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rockqushore & Schaffer, 2000). The literature on youth mentoring mirrors this concept and emphasizes that mentor training and support is essential for relationship success (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002; MENTOR, 2009; Sipe, 2002). The existing research on support for service-learners has focused primarily on that from faculty (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 1997; Rockqushore & Schaffer, 2000). However, service-learning can be a demanding undertaking for faculty. One of the most commonly cited concerns that deter faculty members from using service-learning is that it is time intensive and is difficult to balance with other professional responsibilities (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002; McKay & Rozee, 2004). Perhaps for this reason, faculty members may struggle to provide adequate student support on their own. In cases where service is an optional course component, support and feedback from faculty may be especially minimal. For example, Eyler and Giles (1999) found that across twenty universities, only 21% of surveyed service-learning students reported receiving frequent feedback from faculty. In the service of reducing faculty demands and increasing the availability of support for students, it would be worthwhile to consider alternative sources of student support.

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