"Let Us Pick The Organization": Understanding Adult Student Perceptions of Service-Learning Practice

Susan C. Reed
DePaul University

Howard Rosing
DePaul University

Helen Rosenberg
University of Wisconsin, Parkside

Anne Statham
University of Southern Indiana

"Let *Us* Pick the Organization": Understanding Adult Student Perceptions of Service-Learning Practice

Susan C. Reed, Howard Rosing, Helen Rosenberg, and Anne Statham

Abstract

Service learning offers a pedagogy by which adult students are guided toward understanding their potential for leadership in civic life and community development, strengthening the impact that universities have in communities. In this study, qualitative data is analyzed to determine how adult students perceive their service-learning experiences and what the university could do to involve them more in the future. Respondents provide some evidence that they value opportunities to give back to communities where they have a connection; appreciate hands-on learning that is integrated with classroom learning; benefit from placement experiences that build upon prior knowledge and skills; and prefer greater choice in the selection of their service-learning placement. As the number of adult students entering higher education continues to rise and their retention remains a challenge, understanding how these students are engaged by service learning becomes an important area of exploration for post-secondary institutions.

This study provides insight into adult students' experiences with service learning as well as their perceptions of how the pedagogy could be revised to better meet their needs. Literature on service learning strongly suggests that students' development is enhanced by participation in courses that include community engagement (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Finlay, 2012) and that communities benefit as well from this pedagogy (Sandy & Holland, 2006). Age is seldom a variable in surveys on service learning, and consequently empirical evidence that adult students are participating and benefiting in the same ways as younger students is limited (Reed & Marienau, 2008). As the number of adult students entering higher education continues to rise (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), understanding how service learning affects these students becomes an important area of exploration for post-secondary institutions (Reed, Rosenberg, Statham, & Rosing, 2015).

Equally important is how enhancement of civic engagement skills among adult students can aid communities, providing them with reflective, active, experienced individuals committed to the development of programs and policies that serve the common good. Service learning offers a pedagogy by which adult students are guided toward understanding their potential for leadership in civic life and community development (Reed & Marienau, 2008). By strategically engaging adult students in the community through curriculum, universities can strengthen university partnerships and, in turn, make connections with adults who become leaders within local institutions. Community partner organizations understand this and welcome involvement of adult students because they have experience in the workplace and with multicultural organizations (Stoecker & Tyron, 2009). Adult service learners hold promise not only for their development as community activists but also for their potential to improve the impact that service learning has in communities served.

This study focuses on adult students (defined as 24 years and older), the subject of a rather large adult learner literature. There is also some literature on nontraditional students, and age is one characteristic used to classify students in this way, along with working longer hours, being enrolled part time, or being the first generation in their family to attend college, compared to the traditional population of college students. We will refer to some previous research with nontraditional students and draw insights from related studies of volunteerism and service learning. However, because our criteria for interview subjects in this study was adulthood, we draw mainly upon the literature of adult development and learning and we use the term "adult" consistently rather than "non-traditional" to refer to students throughout the manuscript. When we do use the term "non-traditional," we are referring to the broader category of students of which adults are a subgroup.

Literature Review

There is some reason to believe that adult students are interested and participate in service

learning as much as younger students, especially if programs are designed with their knowledge and skills in mind (Reed & Marienau, 2008). Our recent analysis of students' perceptions at three Midwestern universities, however, found that nontraditional students, especially those with more work experience, were less likely to report that service learning enhanced their classroom experience and contributed to their skills development (Rosenberg, Reed, Statham & Rosing, 2012). These findings suggest the importance of further research on the impact of service learning on adult student learning.

Literature on adult development and learning suggests that the growing numbers of adults entering or reentering colleges and universities bring a wealth of prior knowledge and skills developed through work and relationships. They are inclined to take initiative, prefer to learn in the process of application of knowledge, and are motivated by a sense that their efforts have a purpose outside of the classroom (MacKeracher, 2004). We believe these insights are also pertinent to younger students, as these are qualities of the learning process itself (Brookfield, 2013).

In addition to these adults' distinctive approaches to learning, they have a unique experience of higher education. They tend to identify as workers or parents primarily and derive confidence in their abilities from these roles. Becoming a student requires them to find ways to apply their skills to academic tasks and to develop relationships with faculty and staff that incorporate their multiple identities (Buglione, 2012). Kasworm (2010) found that adult students are aware of the differences between themselves and younger students and tend to believe that they take their education more seriously because of their maturity and responsibilities but also appreciate what they learn from younger people. Adult (and other nontraditional) students are less likely than traditional-age students to participate in campus activities outside of their classes and as such their engagement depends largely on the classroom experience (CCSSE, 2006).

The adult development literature suggests that students may be drawn to community-based learning during a stage of middle adulthood called "generative," defined as an inclination of people in midlife to nurture future generations (Erikson, 1959). Several researchers (e.g., De St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004) explored the role of generativity in the motivations of adults to

volunteer. Stukas, Daly, and Clary (2006) found that adults are more likely to commit to volunteer activity after conversations about the likely benefit to themselves and others, and recommend that organization staff directly address the challenging as well as rewarding experiences that volunteers are likely to have in order to promote their longevity. Snyder and Clary (2004) argue that some form of reflection is needed because "long term commitment to community involvement is more likely when service is grounded in a broader, more abstract and value-based framework and this framework can be created through active reflection" (p. 587).

Given adults' predisposition toward nurturing and the important role of reflection in service learning, community-based learning has the potential to offer the kinds of opportunities that Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1996) say ignite and nurture commitment in adults. These opportunities include encounters with someone significantly different from oneself and the possibility for structured reflection that can lead to recognizing similarities with others. Research on the success of service learning in developing these skills in students generally finds that students who participate in such courses are more likely to express a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others (Finlay, 2012).

Service learning also seems appropriate for adult students who may desire concrete projects where they apply and sharpen skills in partnership with a community organization (Reed & Marienau, 2008). For decades, scholars characterized adult learners as particularly concerned with the application of learning to their working and personal lives and preferring learning from real-life situations (MacKeracher, 2004). These scholars advised practitioners to design courses that focus on genuine problems in order to give adults the opportunity to test their ideas and presuppositions in action (Zull, 2011).

Advances in neuroscience were culled by a group of scholars of adult learning (Johnson & Taylor, 2006) to explain why context is so important for learners and why hands-on learning enhances the development of knowledge and analysis. In this special issue, Zull (2006) argues that learning experiences should be designed to use the four major areas of the brain, specifically the neocortex which promotes more change in the brain when more regions of the cortex are used during a learning experience. For example, the assembly of

images of communities and residents in the back association of the cortex enhances students' ability to comprehend new information (Zull, 2006). Indeed, recent studies of student success find that methodologies that give students the opportunity to apply concepts through community projects and collaboration enhance learning and retention (Brownell & Swaner, 2010).

Another precept of adult education is that adults bring a wealth of knowledge and skills to the classroom that must be reflected upon to enhance the integration of new learning. When individuals integrate new learning with previous experiences and perspectives, strong interactions that involve emotions, images and action have the potential for lasting change in the brain that can result in comprehension, even wisdom (Zull, 2011). Constantly bombarded with sensory information, the brain is designed to organize new information by storing it on neurons that already host similar knowledge. According to Zull (2006), "comprehension depends on the associations between new events and past events. The more past events available to be drawn upon, the more powerful the meaning" (p. 6). While all learners build on prior experiences when processing new learning in the brain, this integration is more complicated for older learners with a wealth of life events to draw upon.

Therefore, adult learning scholars have taken the lead in recommending that classroom activities include exercises that encourage learners to reflect upon those past experiences that relate to the topic at hand (Kolb, 1984). The integration of new learning with tacit knowledge is the focus of emerging research on the use of eportfolio software, particularly the generative knowledge methodology developed at the University of Michigan (Peet, Lonn, Gurin, Boyer, Matney, Marra, Taylor, & Daley, 2011), which includes exercises designed to surface students' stories toward identifying core capacities. Studies showing that service learning develops students' problem solving skills and cultural awareness (Finlay, 2012) suggests that employing this methodology in the service-learning classroom would help adults to build upon their knowledge derived from previous experiences addressing community issues.

One of the other distinctive characteristics of adult learners is that they prefer to be involved in decisions regarding learning (MacKeracher, 2004). The assumption that adults are self-directed learners is prominent in the scholarship

of "androgogy." Early in the development of this literature, Knowles (1970) noted that adults learn effectively outside of a classroom every day and are most comfortable with learning projects that they initiate and direct themselves. Since then, adult learning scholars have emphasized the importance of context, showing that adults are more self-directed at work where they have expertise than in a classroom or situation that is new for them (Candy, 1991). MacKeracher (2004) cautions educators not to assume that adults do not need their direction and support but to provide learning opportunities where the skill of self-direction can be developed.

Service learning is considered a method of teaching and learning that can enhance students' autonomy. This outcome has been demonstrated in classrooms where students are offered the opportunity to make decisions while working with a community partner; and when allowing students more choice in the selection of a service-learning project (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005). Autonomy is a characteristic that adults are likely to have developed before coming back to college, to some extent, and thus they are likely to prefer a degree of independence in their service-learning classroom.

In summary, the scholarship on adult development, adult learning, service learning and volunteerism direct our research about adult students' experiences with community-based learning. In the following sections, we examine these ideas more fully by analyzing what adults think about service learning when it is integrated into the curriculum at a large private university in Chicago. Are older students as satisfied with their service-learning experiences as younger students? What do they value about their experiences, what frustrates them and how do they feel adult students' experiences could be improved? Based on the above literature, our findings seek to more deeply explore four research questions: 1) Do adult students value opportunities to give back to their communities?; 2) Do adult students appreciate learning through hands-on projects?; 3) Do adult students' build upon their knowledge and skills in the classroom and community?; 4) Do adults prefer learning that is flexible and self-directed?.

Methods

In 2012, we published the results of a survey of service learners at three Midwestern universities analyzed by measures of nontraditionality. (See Rosenberg, Reed, Statham and Rosing, 2012, for

details about the larger survey.) Here, we report the results of two qualitative sources of data gathered at the time of the survey for students at only one of the three universities. DePaul University in Chicago is the largest Catholic university in the United States, with an enrollment of more than 25,000, approximately 15,000 of whom are undergraduates. Service learning is not a mandate for all students at DePaul, but is found in 60–70 courses per academic quarter with an average of 1,000 students placed in the community each academic quarter; about 13% of students in these undergraduate programs are 24 or more years of age. This study drew on courses supported by the Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning to administer a survey and recruit interviewees during the 2008–2009 academic year.

The two sources of qualitative data are 1) an open-ended question from the survey that was coded and analyzed by age; and 2) nine in-depth interviews with undergraduate students who were 24 years of age or older whose comments were coded for relevance to our four research questions.

The open-ended question in the survey is "How can DePaul help you to become more involved now and the in the future?" One hundred and forty-five students answered this question, 26 of whom (18%) reported being 24 years of age or older. Answers were coded into seven categories that related to three of our research questions. One hundred and forty-five students answered this question, 26 of whom (18%) reported being 24 years of age or older. Answers were coded into seven categories that related to three of our research questions:

Giving back. Continue with service learning or add more; provide more information about opportunities and benefits; I don't want service learning.

Learning hands on. Better partnerships and work with them; better balance between community work and other assignments.

Self-directed learning. More flexibility in locations and hours; credit for independent work or stipends.

Students' answers to this open-ended question were not related to our third research question, Do adult students build upon their knowledge and skills in the classroom and community?

Two raters independently applied the codes. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using a standard formula of the number of agreements divided by the number of agreements plus the number of disagreements, multiplied by 100. The inter-rater

reliability rate was 80%.

In order to further explore the experiences of adult service learners in more depth, we sent an email at the end of the winter and spring terms to recruit service-learning students aged 24 and older to take part in one-on-one interviews for which they were offered a $10 gift card. Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with adult students about their service-learning experience. These students were queried about when and why they returned to college, their experience in a service-learning course, and what suggestions they had for making service-learning courses more amenable to adult students. Coding began with a graduate student developing categories based on common responses. The data were then reviewed using categories from our four research questions and recoded.

Results

How Can DePaul Help You Be More Involved Now and in the Future?

Despite the small number of respondents for each answer, there are some observable trends by age that relate to our research questions. Younger students were even more likely than older students to advise, "Continue with SL or add more," which contradicted our expectation that adults will be particularly compelled to engage in service through coursework. However, none of the older students indicated that they "don't want service learning" in their courses. Older students tended to suggest a "better balance between community work and other assignments." Students whose comments were assigned this code either suggested more time spent in the community or they asked for better integration of the subject matter of the course with the community project. For example, one student suggested that DePaul "have community involvement actually take the place of some of the classes or have classes with community involvement." Another noted, "The community project that I was involved in was not made to directly relate to the course material. In order to have a more beneficial learning experience, I would like to have the two correlate" (see Table 1).

Older students made comments suggesting a need for better partnerships. For example, one student said:

The [community site] was unorganized. They did not give schedules or tasks that we could relate back to the class. The representatives were not responsive to

Table 1. How DePaul Can Help Students Become More Involved Now and in the Future

Desired Support	<24 years % (N)	24+ years % (N)
Giving Back		
Continue with Service Learning or Add	42.0 (50)	23.1 (6)
Provide More Information	23.5 (28)	26.9 (7)
No Service Learning	5.9 (7)	0.0 (0)
Learning Hands On		
Better Partnerships	9.2 (11)	19.2 (5)
Better Balance Between Community Work and Other Assignments	5.0 (6)	15.4 (4)
Self-Directed Learning		
More Flexibility	10.1 (12)	3.8 (1)
Credit for Independent Work or Stipends	4.2 (5)	11.5 (3)
Total	100.0 (119)	100.0 (26)

calls or emails. Also, from class discussions, other students seemed to be having similar problems. If the service centers could be more organized with students, it could be a worthwhile experience.

In this study, several older students were articulate about changes to service experiences that would enhance learning.

There was a difference by age in the percentage of students who answered "more flexibility in hours and locations" with younger students more likely to make this request. This finding is interesting as many faculty expect adult students to resist service-learning opportunities because of their busy schedules. A few students suggest "credit for independent learning or stipends." For example, one student said, "Offer more paid student worker/internships with community organizations"; another said, "Give more credit to students who participate in off-campus community activities."

In summary, respondents to the open-ended survey question indicate that they appreciate opportunities to contribute to community through coursework, but adults were more likely to critique their hands-on experience, either its role in the overall class experience or implementation of the community partnership. Older participants in this study were more likely to suggest that DePaul faculty alter their practice to have a better balance between the time that students are asked to spend in the community and their other class assignments, and to want improvement in the practices of the organizations that they work with. Students indicated some desire for more self-direction in wanting the university to recognize with credit or compensation the work that they have chosen to do in the community.

Interviews With Undergraduate Service Learners 24+ years old

Interviews with a small number of adult students identified trends that relate to our research questions. Participants in the oral interview welcomed opportunities to work with community organizations and sometimes recognized that regular engagement with an organization would enhance their lives; this experience was especially meaningful for students reconnecting with a community of which they or their family is, or was, once a member.

Several students were aware of their differences from other students and believe that their experience and maturity are an asset to the classroom and the community; at the same time, others appreciated what they learn from younger students and felt that younger students appreciated them in turn.

Giving Back

Some participants in the interviews preferred to have choices in their service-learning placement with some suggesting that they be allowed to find their own.

As predicted by the literature on adults' inclination to give back to their communities, adult students who were interviewed expressed strong appreciation for the experience of working in a community with others and contributing to their well-being as well as a commitment to finding ways to continue to do so. Their comments suggest that the experience caused them to consider community engagement as an important practice in adulthood. For example, one student commented:

> I liked it; I felt like I actually got to talk to these people…like I was doing something by helping someone create a resume and telling them that they will get better at their computer skills and that it's difficult for all of us….I didn't feel like I was going just to fill time…. I went pretty consistently…throughout the quarter, which was kind of tough to get out there.

This same student went on to explain why she felt that the experience of working in the

community was healthy for her and might be a beneficial life practice to be more involved in her community.:

> I think it made me not feel so bad when things were going wrong in my life. It was like small potatoes compared to what other people were dealing with…. It also made me realize that I could volunteer more, or I should…. I think that's a healthy thing to do…because not only does it feel good to do things for other people, but it helps other people. And you might not be getting paid but maybe a couple hours every weekend doesn't really take time out of your life, maybe…a couple hours… that's not a big deal.

A student who had strong connections with the community where students were working found the experience to be especially rewarding. Like those students interviewed by Buglione (2012), she felt that she had "come home" through her service placement:

> My connection with the community… in Humboldt Park, all my life I've been going to events, everything that's related to my Puerto Rican culture is based in Humboldt Park, so I feel I'm more connected to my people, my culture when I'm in the area. It sounds silly but you just feel like you're at home….A lot of friends and family either work or have businesses in the area, either attend school. …So for me to be able to do service work in that area, it was a great experience.

Because of her connection to the community, this student saw herself as a role model for community members who might not see a college education as an option. She revealed that, to her, it's really the importance of bringing knowledge and skills back to the community that she most wants to model, the value of "giving back" rather than just seeking personal success:

> So I really felt…kind of at an advantage to be able to do this and provide them with a service that not only would help them in their everyday lives in regards to the money that they were getting back, but…to let them see that there are

people out there of their own culture, of their own ethnicity, too, that are doing better things, and bringing it back to the community, that's what's important. It's not only showing that you're out there trying to do something better for yourself and for your family, it was bringing it back to the community. Anybody can be a great business person or be this top CEO of a company, but you have to think about how are you going to help your community benefit from what you have accomplished. I think that's very important and I always will keep that with me as I pursue my business.

As a result of their experience in the community, several students realized that it would be possible to fit community work into their already busy schedules and began to think about ways to integrate community work into their future lives:

> …one of the things that I learned: Life gets in the way. So you tend, in general, to forget about community service. Because I had to do it, I found the time to integrate that into my life. And…because of that I am more involved again with [says service site acronym] which I'm very happy…. I…went in again and am volunteering in the classroom a little more often than I was. If I did it once a month now I try to do it every…Wednesday morning. And before I was like well, I have to study. Now I'm like well yes, I have to study but then I can study at night. It's kind of a choice.

These comments reveal these adult students' civic engagement values and their assessment of the contribution of service learning to their lives as well as their strong desire to give back.

Building on prior knowledge. As interviewees compared themselves to others in the class, they were pleased with the contributions they made because of their maturity and past experiences. In her study of identity among adult students, Kasworm (2010) found that they are looking for mechanisms to navigate an environment that is oriented toward younger students. Similarly, we find here that in the process of evaluating their own strengths and weaknesses in such an environment, some respondents note ways in which they feel better prepared by their maturity

and prior experiences than the younger students to succeed academically and in the community, supporting our expectation from the literature that respondents may be motivated to build upon prior experiences and existing skills. Sharing relevant experiences in classroom discussion not only helps students learn but boosts their confidence as indicated by the comments below. This student compares her contributions to those of younger students who might be more comfortable with theoretical knowledge:

> At times…I had an easier time because of my experiences. Like when we talk about social justice and racism and issues like this because I lived in a different part of the world and because I travel so extensively and…I am more experienced…maybe I had an easier time on the conversation…. I would bring in more of the personal experience where other students were bringing in more of the theoretic and academic…. I was able to bring in lots of experience.

Several students reported trying to bring to classroom discussion knowledge gained from previous involvement in their own communities through churches, schools, nonprofits or business:

> …in the business ethics class…I definitely feel like somebody that's older there's space for them to share what experience they've been through, but I guess that depends on each person. In terms of business ethics…I owned a couple bars and owned an audio visual business in California, so I have an understanding of what it takes dealing with just people and contractors and organizations. So…there's definitely room for older people to share.

Also consistent with Kasworm's (2010) findings, these adult students expressed the view that younger students are not as focused on their studies as older students with more than one student using the phrase, "education is wasted on the young." In reflecting on the differences between themselves and younger students in the class, several adult students seemed to be aware that the mistakes they made going to college the first time taught them the value of the opportunity. Adult students reported that the differences

between themselves and younger students were also evident at the community-based learning site. This student felt that as an older student, she took the work more seriously:

> I always went [to the community site]. So many kids were asking for extensions on time, and…they'd complain about getting out there and they'd say that they wrote hours down for travel, which I never did… But people were just really upset about having to travel so they would write those down in their volunteer hours. And just not wanting to do anything, or just sitting there and reading and not asking for something extra. Not wanting to stay busy.

These students are aware of their maturity and the contribution they make in the service-learning classroom and community.

Self-directed learning. Additional information surfaced in the interviews about what changes might help adult students to participate in service learning. Related to our fourth research question, several students requested more choices in their service hours and locations and suggested the option of picking their own site, perhaps drawing upon existing relationships with organizations. While we expected adult students to complain about the burden of community-based learning on their already busy schedules, not all did. This student, however, commented on the difficulty of arranging to be at the community site when there are children to be cared for. She felt that adult students could participate in community-based learning in greater numbers if DePaul offered child care:

> …the only thing I think DePaul should have, for the professors and the staff and everybody, is children service. Because… we like to do this service study; my youngest goes to school only three times a week, so if I was able to go when he was in school then I wouldn't have to pay extra to my babysitter. But otherwise I had times that I went on the weekend and if my husband wasn't available I still had to pay my babysitter…if there was some sort of childcare facility…you still pay to a certain degree, but you know they are well taken care of…it's the place where you work and you go to school. If that was something ever to be offered, it would be a great help

for any others coming back to study.

Another student wished that she could make a contribution to the organization without having to be present on site, such as having a project that she could complete on her own because of the conflict with the responsibilities inherent in her other roles:

> The only way I can do it as an individual, if you give me a duty of making phone calls maybe, I can be the phone call girl, or the customer service or receiving calls and answering questions about the volunteer services or whatever you have me do. So I can still do that as long as it doesn't collide with the hours of me being a mom, a student, and a worker…. Because if it gets into the involvement where I have to physically be somewhere, it runs into a problem.

The logistical difficulties that adult students reported led several to appreciate the flexibility they were given by their placement sites to choose their hours and location of service, but recognized that this wasn't the case for all students:

> So that opportunity to choose how you're going to integrate that into your already busy schedule…was the best part of it. For me, having that advantage of just having that time available was a plus, but for those who don't have that available time … they really do have to move things around to figure out a way to fit that in their schedule.

Such concerns led a number of respondents to recommend that they be given the option of organizing their own placement:

> …maybe let us pick the organization that would still be geared towards the class where we can take our learning towards the class and apply it there but still we're getting something….there's a lot of organizations out here and …I felt like I was stuck; I can't go out and go anywhere else or on my own and hope it would still qualify for the class.

In summary, adult students who participated in the interview seemed to appreciate their community-based learning experiences and several were looking for ways that they could continue to fit such engagement into their schedules. Compared to younger students, most concluded that as adults they were more engaged and that their prior experiences accounted for that difference. Some students reported the challenge of community-based learning given their schedules and multiple roles. Several offered the suggestion that greater flexibility and more choice in the placement selection process would likely allow adult students to participate at a greater level.

Discussion

Do Adult Students Value Opportunities to Give Back to Communities Where They Have a Connection?

The finding that students of all ages valued opportunities to contribute to the welfare of communities, confirms the results of a three university study that there was no difference by age in students' desire to give back (Rosenberg, Reed, Statham, & Rosing, 2012). Service-learning activities contribute to students' belief that they can make such contributions and adopt ongoing practices of civic engagement after graduation (Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007). Older students in this study recognize the value of a lifelong habit of civic engagement and are reminded by service-learning experiences that finding time for active citizenship would enrich their lives, busy though their lives already are. Buglione (2012) also found that adult students feel that the benefit of civic engagement in their lives was "revealed" to them by the experience of working in a community required for a service-learning course.

Students with a prior attachment to a neighborhood within the institution's city were particularly anxious to serve and felt rewarded by service-learning opportunities that "pay back" residents of communities that contributed to their development and that of their family. Such inclination reflects generative developmental needs that enrich the lives of both younger and older students. Adult students in Buglione's (2012) in-depth interviews also reported a feeling of "being home" when working in a community like their own. These findings suggest the value of allowing students to choose their own site to provide for this sort of meaningfully generative experience, a consideration that is discussed below.

Do Adult Students Appreciate Hands-on Learning That Is Integrated with Classroom Learning?

In our previous research (Rosenberg, Reed, Statham, & Rosing, 2012) we found that younger students were more likely to appreciate the experience of connecting learning to the community through the service-learning project. This qualitative data provides insight into how this connection could be more effective for older students. Like Buglione (2012), we found that adult students were particularly interested in class discussions that helped to connect the ideas surfaced by readings and assignments with the mission and practical efforts of their organization as well as their own activities in the placement. These findings are consistent with Snyder and Clary's (2004) insight, noted earlier, that adult commitment to civic engagement is fostered by reflection that grounds community-based activity in an abstract and value-based framework. Perhaps adults are particularly concerned with this sort of knowledge integration because of the prior experiences that they bring to the classroom. Discussion may help them to make connections between learning from both newer and older events and to find meaning by linking experiential learning to concepts. Another factor may be the importance that adult students place on classroom encounters in their overall campus engagement.

As Rosing, Reed, Ferrari, and Bothne (2010) found in their analysis of students' complaints about service learning, not all courses are designed with placements that relate directly back to the concepts of the course. One factor in achieving such congruence in service-learning courses is the complicated process by which partnerships are built and maintained with organizations, whose own activities may change over time. As educators balance the competing demands of course objectives, it is important to note that for all students, perhaps older students especially, knowledge integration is enhanced by a clearer connection between what students are learning hands on, the images, relationships and obstacles that they encounter, and classroom discussion that helps to draw relationships between the learning occurring in multiple areas of the brain (Zull, 2011). Buglione (2012) suggests intentional dialogue between older and younger students that acknowledges differences and allows for a learning exchange between those with more experience and those reportedly more comfortable in the conceptual realm of academia.

Do Adult Students Benefit from Placement Experiences That Build upon Prior Knowledge and Skills?

Our earlier study (Rosenberg, Reed, Statham, & Rosing, 2012) found that those with fewer occasions to build skills within organizations or to work in diverse settings would be particularly appreciative of the rich opportunities that service-learning courses can offer. On the other hand, more experienced students bring with them knowledge about "how systems and organizations are run" (Buglione, 2012, p. 85). It may be that students with professional expertise have higher expectations of their placement and the opportunities for skill development that are offered.

In this study, older students asked the university to develop stronger partnerships with community organizations and to work more carefully to ensure such rewarding experiences for them. Rosing et al.'s (2010) study of student complaints that did not disaggregate responses by age found that criticism of the community partner's level of organization and suggestions for better training and orientation were the most common. Students wanted more guidance and responsiveness from their site supervisors; and they wanted to do more meaningful work. Our findings suggest that adults may be especially aware of this challenge and be looking for placement activities that utilize their existing knowledge and skills. University placement processes, designed primarily for inexperienced students, may not currently be equipped to provide individualized assessments that would allow for matching students' skills to organizations prepared to benefit from them. But growing numbers of nontraditional students in service-learning courses may require this.

We've seen that service-learning partners recognize the value of older students with organizational skills and experience working with diverse populations (Stoecker & Tyron, 2009). University staff could help community agencies to take advantage of adults' leadership ability to guide less experienced students in the work of the agency, a process that would enhance community based learning for both generations. For the adult student, integrating established roles of worker, parent, and active citizen with the developing role of student builds confidence that can lead to heightened academic success (Kasworm, 2010; Reed, et al., 2015).

Do Adult Students Prefer Greater Choice in the Selection of Their Service-Learning Placement?

Some adult students in this study articulated their preference for choosing from a selection of community-based projects, indicating that personal and professional connections as well as competing responsibilities such as child care would guide their choice. Similarly, Rosing, Reed, Ferrari and Bothne (2010) found that students expressed the desire to choose their own sites, including placements that drew upon their expertise. Buglione's (2012) respondents felt that if they could arrange their placement they could have a greater impact in their local community; on the other hand, these students wanted assistance from faculty because of the stress of finding a placement within a short period of time that met the requirements of the class.

Such practical considerations as the time needed to place students and the importance of maintaining ongoing partnerships with community organizations have deterred many institutions from providing students such autonomy in the placement process (Reed & Marienau, 2008). Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) analyzed the benefit of their student-directed approach with high school students who help set the goals for service learning and choose their own service-learning activity. Those students who chose their own activity made greater gains in civic knowledge than those students who engaged in an activity chosen by the teacher; and self-directed students reported a strong attachment to the community. Growing numbers of online service-learning courses (Strait & Sauer, 2004) with students located all over the country (and world) develop mechanisms for guiding students through the process of identifying opportunities for civic engagement in their communities.

Some students in this study wanted credit for independent work in the community. Adult educators have developed standards and processes, referred to as prior learning assessment (PLA) that universities could employ to document and assess students' activism in the community (Fiddler Marienau, & Whitaker, 2006). A survey of 48 institutions by the Council for Adult and

---

How to Enhance Adult Students' Engagement in Service Learning

- Provide greater autonomy so students can shape their own learning experiences
- Look for opportunities to (re)connect students with their communities
- Design discussion to integrate new experiences with prior learning
- Match students' skills with organizations that can benefit from them
- Help community agencies to take advantage of students' leadership experience
- Give students credit for learning from previous and ongoing community engagement

---

Experiential Learning found that students who receive credit through PLA are more likely to complete their degree (CAEL, 2010). In addition, adult students who are allowed to use their ongoing community work for a service-learning placement may find that work they were already doing in the community is enhanced by new ideas, information, networks, and structured reflection gained from their role as students.

We also note here that some students believe that a stipend or scholarship would allow them to be more engaged in community-based learning. Such students may be struggling financially and feel that it's a challenge to give up paid working hours to spend time with a community partner. Offering scholarships that consider students' involvement in service has been advocated as a way to promote student development (Zlotkowski, Longo, & Williams, 2006). Campus Compact (2007) reports that 67% of institutions are following this practice.

Conclusion

While this study contributes to educators' understanding of adult students' experiences and points to appropriate adjustments in classroom and community practice, the generalizability of its findings is limited. Institutions of higher education vary in the degree to which the culture supports service learning with nontraditional students, depending on student population and resources available to support faculty engaged in service learning. Therefore, this study at one private university with a strong service-learning center will be of greater value when its results are compared with those from other institutions. In addition, our small sample size limits the reliability of the findings, suggesting that further research is needed to confirm results.

Nevertheless, this study provides encouragement to those working with adult students whose busy lives suggest that service-learning courses are unmanageable. Ongoing research at the American Association of Community Colleges (Prentice & Robinson, 2007) and the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012) provides evidence of both the success that such institutions have providing service-learning courses to an older, working population and the need for more such opportunities for adult and other nontraditional students. Students' comments herein serve to remind university staff and faculty that many of their students are from the very neighborhoods and organizations with which they partner. Drawing upon the connections that a student brings to higher education may not only enhance that student's engagement in the experience, restoring commitment to community, but it could also help achieve the call of the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement to "Expand the number of robust, generative civic partnerships and alliances locally…to address common problems, empower people to act, strengthen communities…"(National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012).

References

Billig, S.H., Root, S., & Jesse, D. (2005). The relationship between quality indicators of service learning and student outcomes: Testing professional wisdom. In S. Root, J. Callahan, and S.H. Billig (Eds.), *Advances in service-learning research: Vol. 5, Improving service-learning practice: Research on models to enhance impacts* (p. 97–115). Greenwich, CT.: Information Age.

Brookfield, S.D. (2013). *Powerful techniques for teaching adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Brownell, J.E., & Swaner, L.E. (2010). *Five impact practices: Research on learning outcomes, completion and quality*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Buglione, S.M. (2012). Nontraditional approaches with nontraditional students: Experiences of learning, service and identity development (doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1064&context=doctoral_dissertations.

Campus Compact (2007). *Service statistics: Highlights and trends of Campus Compact's Annual Membership Survey.* Providence, RI: Campus Compact.

Candy, P.C. (1991). *Self-direction for lifelong learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) (2012). *A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success (a first look)*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program.

Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). (2006). *Act on fact: Using data to improve student success*. Austin, TX: CCSSE.

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2010). *Fueling the race to postsecondary success: A 48 institution study of prior learning assessment and adult learning outcomes*. Chicago, IL: CAEL.

Daloz, L.A.P., Keen, C.H., Keen, J.P., & Parks, S.D. (1996). *Common fire: Lives of commitment in a complex world.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

De St. Aubin, E., McAdams, D.P., & Kim, T. (2004). *The generative society: Caring for future generations.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Erikson, E.H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York, NY: Norton.

Eyler, J.S., Giles, D.E., Stenson, C.M., & Gray, C. (2001). *At a glance: What we know about the effects of service-learning on college students, faculty, institutions and communities, 1993–2000* (3rd edition). Washington, DC: Learn and Serve America, Corporation for National and Community Service.

Fiddler, M. Marienau, C., & Whitaker, U. (2006). *Assessing learning: Standards, principles and procedures*. Dubuque, IA: Kindall/Hunt.

Finlay, A. (2012). *A brief review of the evidence on civic learning in higher education.* Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Hart, D., Donnelly, T., Youniss, J.A., & Atkins, R. (2007). High school community service as a predictor of adult voting and volunteering. *American Education Research, 44*(1): 197-219.

Johnson, S., & Taylor, K., (Eds). (2006). *The neuroscience of adult learning: New directions for adult and continuing education, No. 110*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kasworm, C.E. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly, 60*(2), 143-160.

Knowles, M.S. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education, andragogy vs. pedagogy*. New York, NY: Association Press.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Up-

per Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

MacKeracher, D. (2004). *Making sense of adult learning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012). *A crucible moment: College learning and democracy's future*. Washington, DC: Association of American College and Universities.

Peet, M., Lonn, S., Gurin, P., Boyer, K., Matney, M., Marra, T., Taylor, S., & Daley, A. (2011). Fostering integrative knowledge through eportfolios. *International Journal of ePortfolio, 1*(1), 11–31.

Prentice, M., & Robinson, G. (2007). *Linking service learning and civic engagement in community college students*. Washington, DC: AACC

Reed, S.C., & Marienau, C. (Eds). (2008). *Linking adults with community: Promoting civic engagement through community based learning: New directions in adult and continuing education, No. 118*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reed, S.C., Rosenberg, H., Statham, A., & Rosing, H. (2015) The effect of community service learning on undergraduate persistence in three institutional contexts. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 21*(2), 22–36.

Rosenberg, H., Reed, S.C., Statham, A., & Rosing, H. (2012) Service-learning and the nontraditional student: What's age got to do with it? in J. Hatcher and R. Bringle (Eds.) *Advances in service-learning research series, Vol. 11, Understanding service-learning and community engagement: Crossing boundaries through research*, pp. 157–178. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

Rosing, H., Reed, S., Ferrari, J.R., & Bothne, N.J. (2010). Understanding student complaints in the service learning pedagogy. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 46*, 472–481.

Sandy, M., & Holland, B. (2006). Different worlds and common ground: Community partner perspectives on campus-community partnerships. Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, *13(*1), 30–43.

Snyder, M., & Clary, E.G. (2004). Volunteerism and the generative society. In E. de St. Aubin, D. McAdams, and T. Kim (Eds.), *The generative society: Caring for future generations,* pp. 221–237. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Stoecker, R., & Tyron, E.A. (Eds.) (2009). *Unheard voices: Community organizations and service-learning*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Strait, J., & Sauer, T. (2004). Constructing experiential learning for online courses: The birth of e-Service. *Educause Quarterly, 27*(1). http://connect.educause.edu/library/abstract/ConstructingExperien/39848?time=1194202086.

Stukas, A.A., Daly, M., & Clary, E.G. (2006). Lessons from research on volunteering for mobilizing adults to volunteer for positive youth development. In E.G. Clary and J.E. Rhodes (Eds.), *Mobilizing adults for positive youth development: Strategies for closing the gap between beliefs and behaviors* (pp. 65–82). NewYork, NY: Springer.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *Digest of education statistics, 2011 (NCES 2011-001)*. Retrieved November 2, 2012 from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2009020.

Zlotkowski, E., Longo, N., & Williams, J. (2006). *Students as colleagues*. Providence, RI: Campus Compact.

Zull, J.E. (2006). Key aspects of how the brain learns. In S. Johnson and K. Taylor (Eds.), *The neuroscience of adult learning: New directions for adult and continuing education, No. 110* (pp. 3–9). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Zull, J.E. (2011). *From brain to mind: Using neuroscience to guide change in education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Acknowledgements

About the Authors

Susan C. Reed is an associate professor in the School for New Learning at DePaul University. Howard Rosing is the executive director of the Irwin W. Steans Center for Community-based Service-Learning and Community Service Studies at DePaul University. Helen Rosenberg is a professor, in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, Parkside. Anne Statham is director of Service Learning and a professor in the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice Studies at the University of Southern Indiana.