Long-Term Outcomes: How Participation in Project Community Affects UM Alumni

By Ian Robinson & Johanna Masse

Introduction

Project Community is one of the University of Michigan’s longest running community service-learning (CSL) programs. It began in the mid-1960s, when students committed to social change through community action sought to link these efforts to their academic studies through independent studies with faculty who supported this approach (Chesler, 2002). Today, Project Community is a partnership between the Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning, in the Division of Student Affairs, and the Department of Sociology, in the College of LS&A. Between 350 and 450 UM undergrads participate in one of Project Community’s 30+ sections each academic year. Students work with a community partner in one of five program areas – education, public health, criminal justice, gender and sexuality, and organizing for social justice – for an average of four hours per week, for 10 to 12 weeks. They also meet weekly with the other students in their section for 1.5 hours to discuss what they have seen and done at site and relate these experiences to the sociological and journalistic readings assigned for that week.

Project Community is really two courses. Soc 389 is the “entry-level” course in which students are placed in one of the 30+ sections. Soc 325 is our course for the peer-facilitators who lead each section of Soc 389, both in the work they do at site and in their weekly seminar discussions of site and readings. The Soc 325 students are supported in this work by the Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) responsible for their program area, by Project Community staff, and by the faculty sponsor. Most of our peer facilitators are recruited from the most able and committed of the students in our Soc 389 sections. They also receive special training at retreats that take place at the beginning and in the middle of the term (Chesler, et.al., 2003).

Community Service Learning pedagogy draws on two strands of American social theory. First, American pragmatists, from William James (Greenspan, 1979) through John Dewey (Dewey 1897) to recent work on teaching algebra by Bob Moses (Moses & Cobb, 2002), have long argued that learning is most engaging and effective when it is active and experientially grounded. Second, social movement activists, going back at least to Jane Addams’ rationale for Settlement Houses (Addams, 1910, 114-7), have argued that, by building personal connections across the social chasms of race and class, people come to understand what otherwise remain abstract “social problems” as unjust and unnecessary harms to people like those about whom they have come to care passionately. The claims that underpinned the Settlement House movement are amply supported by contemporary research on the sources of civic engagement (Jacoby et.al., 2009; Colby et.al., 2007). The synthesis of personal connection and intellectual understanding yields the commitment to action, and the analytic and strategic capacities, necessary for successful social reform.

CSL programs reflect this pedagogy by combining weekly community service activities, historical, social science and journalistic accounts of the problems and issues encountered at site, and structured reflection on the relationship between the two. A rich case study literature, much of it found in the U of M-based Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, attests to the positive impacts that CSL programs have on student learning.
The Survey

In February 2008, we sent out email invitations to participate in our web-based survey to every student from the cohorts that began their UM undergrad careers in Fall 1998 and 2002 who participated in Project Community: 663 students. We sent an equal number of invitations to alumni randomly selected from a list of all the other students in those cohorts. The survey took 5-10 minutes to answer, depending on whether one had been a Project Community student. Prizes of $500 were awarded to the two who guessed closest to the actual number of survey respondents. We obtained 234 usable responses: exactly half had taken one or more Project Community courses; the other half had not taken any.

The people who took the trouble to go to our web site and fill out the survey are not a representative sample of the people we invited to participate. For example, women were about 71% of all PC participants in our two cohorts, but they made up almost 82% of our survey respondents from that group. Similarly, while women made up about 49% of the Fall 98 and Fall 02 cohort admits, two thirds of our respondents from the pool of those who had never taken a PC course were women. It seems likely that people for whom PC was more important are more likely to respond, though if that is so, it is puzzling that the response rate for the non-PC alumni is virtually the same. In any event, our sample provides valuable insights into what over one hundred of those who took Project Community found to be of enduring value.

Importance of Project Community Relative to other Courses

Before any questions about Project Community were raised, all of our respondents were asked an open-ended question that sought to capture five of important contributions that we thought CSL could make to student development: “Thinking back over all the courses you took as an undergrad at UM, please identify the THREE that:

1. Involved the highest level of meaningful interaction with people of other races and ethnicities;
2. Resulted in the greatest increases in your understanding of the causes and consequences of racial, ethnic and social class inequalities in the USA;
3. Most increased your motivation to get involved in organizations and efforts to promote social justice;
4. Most helped you to develop the skills and experience necessary to work effectively with community partners; and
5. Contributed the most to the overall value of your UM experience.”

Table One reports the responses of the subset who had taken Project Community. We see that Project Community stood out most for its contribution to what we might call the intergroup relations experience, civic engagement skills and the motivation to make social change (Rows 1, 3 and 4, respectively). However, 43% of these respondents also rated it as one of the top three courses contributing to their understanding of social inequalities, a matter of cognitive or intellectual development. We don’t know what criteria our respondents used to decide which courses were of the greatest “overall value” to them, but Project Community was also one of the top three such courses for just over one third of the students answering this question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Learning</th>
<th>Most Imp Course (#)</th>
<th>2nd Most Imp Course (#)</th>
<th>3rd Most Imp Course (#)</th>
<th>Share who put PC in Top Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Highest level of meaningful interaction … with other races (N=98)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>68/98= 69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Greatest &gt; in understanding of social inequalities (N=96)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>41/96= 43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Greatest &gt; in motivation to engage in social justice work (N=89)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>56/89= 63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Most help w/ skills … to work with community partners (N=81)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>57/81= 70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Most overall value in UM experience (N=92)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32/92= 35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scale and Nature of Project Community's Impact During and After College

A course can have an impact on students’ lives by making new connections – intellectual, ethical, emotional – that encourage them to take other courses that they would probably not have taken otherwise, and which result in important learning. We asked students who had taken Project Community whether it had such an effect. Almost 44% said that it had. A course can also encourage students to get involved in extracurricular activities that they would probably not have undertaken otherwise. Almost 54% of PC participants indicated that Project Community had this sort of effect in their case. For 29%, the course had both effects; for 69% it had at least one of the two effects.

Different course and extracurricular activity choices are likely to contribute to different post-UM attitudes and behavior. We asked “How much of an impact has your participation in Project Community had on your life since college?” In response, 11% said “none at all,” 53% said “some,” 24% said “quite a bit,” and 12% said “a great deal.” We asked how they would evaluate those impacts. Given four choices, ranging from very positive to very negative, over 76% said “very positive,” 21% said “somewhat positive,” and 1% (one person) each said “somewhat negative” and “very negative.” A follow-up question asked for one or two examples of such positive or negative impacts. The following illustrate the main types of effect identified by those who felt the course had a positive or very positive impact:

• “Project Community provided me with an opportunity to apply what I was reading about in the classroom to a hands-on experience.”
• “I became a Soc major because of Project Community. I pursued social justice jobs in my time off from school. I developed better leadership skills. Many, many pluses.”
• “I broadened my awareness of others’ issues and became much less focused on my own troubles…”
• “Since college, the lessons I learned in Project Community courses have informed my ability to think outside the box and continually question my own assumptions.”

Comparing PC and Non-PC Alumni

Borrowing a question from the study of UM Alumni developed by Professors Patricia and Gerald Gurin and Dr. Katrina Wade-Golden, we asked our respondents to give us two kinds of rankings (on a scale of 1 to 5) for nine aspects of their lives: first, how important nine types of capacity, interest or understanding have been in their life since graduating from the University of Michigan; and second, how much their experiences at the University of Michigan contributed to their development in each of these areas:

1. Ability to work effectively and get along well with people of different races and cultures
2. Ability to see the world from someone else’s point of view
3. Active interest in community service
4. Empowering others
5. Working for social justice with community partners
6. Thinking about issues facing the USA
7. Thinking about issues facing the world
8. Knowledge of a particular field / discipline
9. Intellectual curiosity and excitement

Two questions, with nine areas explored for each, yields 18 comparisons. Mean scores for the PC alumni were higher than those of the non-PC alumni for 15 of these, and the three exceptions were not statistically significant. Of the 15 comparisons in which PC alumni means were higher, 11 were statistically significant, with the strongest effects found in areas (3), (4), (5), (6) and (7). However, because PC participants – and even more so our PC alumni survey respondents – are disproportionately women, some apparent PC effects might really be due to differences between men and women. Similar issues could arise around race. We therefore used multiple regression analyses to control for race and sex. Our results indicate that PC had a statistically significant impact on the importance of UM’s contribution to student learning in the four areas indicated with blue lettering. PC also had a statistically significant impact on the importance in alumni’s lives since graduation of the three interests with yellow highlighting. There were no statistically significant differences in the mean scores of the two PC alumni cohorts on any of these questions. This suggests that, contrary to Sax (1999), there is no erosion of PC effects over the period from two to six years after graduation.
How do these differences in UM learning and post-UM priorities play out in alumni career choices, family income and life satisfaction levels? Graph One, above, summarizes our findings. Its first (left-hand side) bars indicates that more than twice as many PC alumni were working for non-profit organizations as we found in the control group. As we might expect, given this difference, PC alumni earned less than their non-PC counterparts (middle bars). Despite the lower income, there was no statistically significant difference in the average level of life satisfaction between PC alumni and the others (right-hand bars).

Conclusions

Our survey data appear to confirm the expectations of the pedagogical traditions upon which community service learning courses are based. PC alumni assign a higher priority to thinking globally and acting locally to advance social justice goals than a UM alumni control group that did not take Project Community. PC alumni are more likely than the control group to have learned about these things, and to have acquired these priorities and commitments, while they were students at the University of Michigan, even though almost all (91%) of the students in the control group had done some kind of community service prior to and/or while attending UM. Finally, large majorities (63-70%) of alumni identified Project Community as one of the three courses that had contributed most to five aspects of their development while at the University of Michigan. In future work, we hope to examine whether other CSL and experiential courses at the University of Michigan have similar effects.

References