

# Reducing self-entitlement attitudes through service learning

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*The purpose of the current study is to explore the effects of community service work and community involvement on perceptions of self-entitlement—expectations of others to do things for oneself—among undergraduate students. Over the course of a 16-week semester, 26 randomly selected subjects (20 community college psychology students and six state university psychology students) volunteered to participate in a community service gardening program. Students were administered a pre-test questionnaire that measured their self-entitlement attitudes and attitudes addressing the importance of community service. At the end of the 16-week semester, students were administered a post-test questionnaire to assess attitudes toward their community service work. A control group ( $n = 26$ ) was administered the same questionnaire, but they did not participate in community service work throughout the semester. Results were analyzed using a t-test and statistical significance was found ( $p < .05$ ). Results indicate that after participating in a service program, student perception of the importance of community service work significantly increased and their sense of self-entitlement decreased.*

## Introduction

Previous research has explored the importance of social work within the community and how people need to feel “connected” to society by providing a specific skill or trade to others within the community (Adler, 1964; Lisan, 1998). Research has also shown the importance of community service work in connection to ethics and moral development (Boss, 1994). Adler describes the importance of establishing social interest—the need to identify with and cooperate,

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*Recently my family and I were driving down a street near our home and we were dismayed at the amount of litter strewn about. The surrounding area was beautiful with plants and flowers that lined the sidewalks, but the volume of trash in the street created an ugly aura to otherwise beautiful scenery in the neighborhood. Furthermore, cars drove by and people walked past the mess, seemingly oblivious to the squalor that lay before them. My son asked, "Why do people throw trash in the street? It makes everything look so ugly... someone should clean it up!" I suggested that he was absolutely right, and 30 minutes*

contribute and volunteer with others for the common good of the community. As a collective society, citizens need to remind themselves to engage in prosocial behaviors for the common good even though there may be no direct or reciprocal benefit to them.

Many individuals—adults as well as children—have experienced an increase in what is referred to as “self-entitlement”: an expectation of others to do things for oneself or one’s community. Socially aware adults maintain that by teaching children to assume more civic and social responsibility such as engaging in volunteer clean-up programs and community service work, attitudes of self-entitlement will decrease. The following research is especially important, given the negative ramifications of long term self-entitlement attitudes. For example, what happens when parents and their children do not

assume responsibility for their learning and performing well in school? What happens when people do not accept responsibility for their own health issues such as obesity or substance abuse (i.e., alcoholism or chronic cigarette smoking)? Assumptions about self-entitlement lead them to expect others to correct the problem that began with their own poor lifestyle choices. Thus, the community takes on the responsibility of the individual rather than the individual taking responsibility for himself or herself. Unfortunately, when too many people develop self-entitlement attitudes, the community no longer becomes capable of helping those in need of assistance. Communities are strongest when individuals engage in volunteer work to help each other and weakest when individuals expect things to be done for them, things *they* should recognize as part of their individual responsibility.

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## Civic responsibility

Larson-Keagy (2002) notes that community colleges and universities are responsible for the development of knowledge and character among students and are in a unique position to promote such development. Larson-Keagy defines “civic responsibility” as “an active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good” (p. 2). The relationship between the terms “civic responsibility” and “self-entitlement” is critical here. Civic responsibility encourages individuals to take on more community obligations for the common good, whereas self-entitlement expects the common good for oneself. Therefore, it is vital that educators use the systems within community colleges and universities to emphasize the importance of teaching individuals how to serve each other and their community for the common good. Indeed, Sax (2000) notes: “Of special concern in much of this discussion is the disengagement of young people... interest in politics has plummeted, as measured by student understanding of the importance of being informed, voting, and discussing political affairs.” Disengagement today has extended far beyond the

boundaries of political topics to broad disengagement from social and community responsibility.

An important component of the present research is identifying key methods to reduce attitudes of self-entitlement through engagement in community work and service learning projects. When children and adults begin to value the importance of shared work through community projects, individual responsibility and self-efficacy improve. As a result, subjective reports show pride in belonging to one’s school or community.

Recent research suggests that service learning and volunteer work are critical topics when exploring specific methods for the development of self-efficacy (Hoffman et al., 2004; Hoffman & Wallach, 2005), civic responsibility (Larson-Keagy, 2002), improved academic performance, and a sense of individual “connectedness” within the community (Astin & Sax, 1998; Battistoni, 2000). Historically, academic institutions have served as model environments in which to address community service. Teachers can emphasize morally appropriate and responsible behaviors for social interaction, and students can learn how to communicate with each other in culturally diverse environments.

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Institutions of higher learning have traditionally prepared students for the demands of the world by emphasizing critical thinking and social responsibility, and the importance of contributing to community and social activities. John Dewey, a pioneer in higher education, elucidated the responsibility all societies have to provide equal opportunity for educational advancement. All individuals within a society have an obligation to behave in socially responsible ways and to engage in critical thinking that will improve the overall quality of human interaction (Dewey, 1916).

Community colleges, in particular, have provided unique opportunities for students to learn and understand the importance of active community involvement and civic responsibility. Frequently a community college provides a critical transition from irresponsible behaviors demonstrated in adolescence and young adulthood (i.e., poor study habits, financial irresponsibility, vandalism and gang-related behaviors, etc.) to morally advanced, abstract thinking expected in universities. Community colleges, in particular, allow individuals the benefits of educational advancement, self-analysis, and personal growth which may not have

been available to them in other environments. Young adults ill prepared to meet the responsibilities required in institutions of higher learning can develop necessary skills within community colleges.

Unfortunately, society often appears to emphasize the importance of economic gain at the expense of individual integrity. Historically, individualistic cultures such as the United States have used monetary gain and conspicuous consumption as the sole criteria in measuring “success” or “failure” in society (Kitayama et al., 1997).

Indeed, many students today are unaware of what “community service learning” means or the importance of “giving” as opposed to “receiving”—the need for civic responsibility and volunteerism within society. Any behavior that has a “cost” (providing a benefit to others with no return investment, a.k.a. the *quid pro quo* culture) and does not provide some immediate reward is simply a “waste of time” and useless. The essence of community service work is that it does in fact involve some “cost” (i.e., one’s time, effort, etc.) as the individual contributes to a larger community. If there were no “cost” to the individual in community service work, then the experience itself would lose

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personal meaning and value. The cost affirms the individual's meaning and "sense of fit" or interconnectedness within society. By definition, then, the antithesis of community service work is the notion of self-entitlement, a sense of expectation that others will provide without cause. Community service work means sacrificing—volunteering time and effort for the improvement of the community.

Attitudes of self-entitlement appear in students who feel "entitled" to certain things within the classroom—perhaps a passing grade simply for attending class or grading leniency because a particular topic or concept was somewhat more difficult for them to comprehend. Specialists within the medical field now advertise to potential customers that they "deserve" a better body through advances in cosmetic surgery because it will make them "feel better" about themselves—but is this really true?

The purpose of the current research is two-fold: a) to identify the important psychosocial effects of a community service program within a community college environment; and b) to illustrate the negative consequences when individuals within a community are not provided opportunities for en-

gagement in community service learning projects and volunteer activities.

## **Origins of self-entitlement**

Recent research suggests that infants and children are highly susceptible to role models and tend to emulate the types of behaviors to which they are exposed (Bandura, 1965; 1999). When parents themselves neglect personal responsibility for their individual behavior and tend to blame others for their own mistakes, children learn that as an acceptable pattern of behavior. The style of parenting can have tremendous ramifications for children's behaviors and situational determinants that trigger those behaviors (Baumrind, 1991; Greenfield, 1995).

"Permissive entitlement" parenting refers to an increasingly more common philosophy where parents neglect or avoid teaching their offspring the importance of environmentally and socially responsible behaviors by fostering a culture of self-entitlement, conspicuous consumption, and indulgence (Hoffman, 2006). Unfortunately many children and adolescents are no longer afforded opportunities to learn civic engagement

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or participate in environmentally pro-social activities, such as picking up litter on public beaches or in parks. When students are not afforded opportunities to engage in volunteer work, they often miss particular interactions with others that would help them discover their unique individual strengths and aptitudes. Students have reported a significantly more “meaningful” experience in higher education when they choose opportunities for improving campus environments, such as involvement in a campus gardening program (Hoffman & Wallach, 2005).

One purpose of the current study is to determine what effects, if any, a volunteer service learning program can have on perceptions of the importance of volunteer community work and self-entitlement attitudes among community college students and student mentors. The researchers propose that as experiences in volunteer work, community service learning, and cooperative behaviors increase, there will be a negative correlation with self-entitlement attitudes.

## **Method**

### **Subjects**

A total of 52 undergraduate students volunteered for the current study. Of 26 students randomly selected for the experimental group, 20 were enrolled in a community college and six were enrolled at California State University Northridge (CSUN) and served as mentors to the community college students. Twenty-six students were also randomly selected to serve as a control group. The subjects in the control group were undergraduate students enrolled at either the community college or CSUN.

### **Procedure**

Over the course of a 16-week semester, 20 community college students and six CSUN student mentors volunteered their services in a community college gardening program. The 26 remaining subjects served as the control group. The focus of the gardening program was to plant flowers, weed, water, cut grass and make general improvements to the landscape of the college. Students were not paid for their work; they volunteered to serve the community college. Students in both the control and experimental groups were

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administered a pre-test: Community Service Self-Entitlement Questionnaire (CSSEQ) that scored perceptions of the importance of community service learning work and levels of self-entitlement (see Appendix A).

Students in the gardening program reported to the campus garden at 7:00 a.m. Saturday mornings and were given a variety of garden tools to begin work (i.e., shovels, rakes, mowers, pruning shears, etc.). Each CSUN mentor was assigned to work with either two or three community college students in the garden. The students were given basic instructions how to plant flowers—depth, watering, cultivation, and so on. The CSUN mentors were encouraged to communicate with the community college students, establish a rapport, and provide assistance for future transfer to four-year institutions (i.e., applications, interviews with counselors, and tours of the university campus). The gardening program continued for approximately three hours each Saturday morning over the course of a 16-week semester (Spring 2006). At the end of a day's gardening work, subjects relaxed and enjoyed lunch together. At the end of the semester, all subjects took the post-test CSSEQ questionnaire.

## Results

Data was analyzed using an Independent Samples *t*-test to measure the difference between the means of treatment and the control groups. Statistical significance was found on specific questions relating to levels of perceived importance and self-entitlement: "I feel as though I deserve things simply because I want them" ( $p < .05$ ); "When I participate in volunteer and community service work, I feel as though I am contributing to make society better for all people" ( $p < .01$ ); "I feel that children should become more actively involved in community and volunteer work" ( $p < .05$ ). Overall scores between the groups reflect an increase in the importance of community service and a decrease in self-entitlement attitudes (as measured by the CSSEQ),  $t(51) = 1.98, p = .03$ .

## Discussion

The results of the study suggest that community service work significantly increases student perceptions of the importance of volunteer efforts within the community as well as significantly reduces self-entitlement attitudes. Furthermore, anecdotal comments suggest that once students realize how their community service work

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improves the campus environment, civic pride and campus pride also increase: "The program itself was fascinating and rewarding for me... working in the garden allowed me to meet new people. I found that all of the community college students wanted to succeed and felt pride in their community." The student mentors also note that the community college students develop pride among themselves: "I know that having that beautiful garden in the school makes all of the students proud to go there because it is something that they did."

A second important component of the study was to establish that as subjects engage in community service learning projects and volunteer work, their sense of expectation for others to do work for them decreases. Self-entitlement scores significantly dropped as students became aware of the satisfaction of engaging in cooperative work to improve a college community. The overall project atmosphere was noticeably positive, as students communicated with each other and shared knowledge and skills together. Several of the students who developed partnerships with the mentors will transfer to four-year higher education as a result of the community service learning project.

For future research addressing community service learning, the authors suggest different types of projects, perhaps working with high school students to show them the importance of community service work and volunteer work. A second suggestion is to focus on long term or longitudinal effects of community service learning. For example, the current researchers have no idea if the changes in attitudes towards service learning and volunteer work are relatively short term or long term. A longitudinal service learning project may help better understand the permanence of community service attitudes within a variety of community projects.

Twenty-first century citizens live in an era when self-centered and egoistic behaviors—"success at any cost" combined with an "in your face" attitude—are rewarded, and self-entitlement attitudes are more pervasive among children as well as adults. Individuals have become increasingly reluctant to accept responsibility for their behavior and instead assign that responsibility to others, often with disastrous consequences. Future research that can elucidate the dynamic relationship between community service learning, pro-social behavior and individual responsibility within the community is certainly welcome.



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## Appendix A

### Community Service Self-Entitlement Questionnaire (CSSEQ)

Please answer the following questions where a score of:

- 1 = Absolutely Untrue
- 2 = Somewhat Untrue
- 3 = Undecided
- 4 = Somewhat True
- 5 = Absolutely True

1. I feel that participating in volunteer or community work is an important activity that all people should be involved in \_\_\_\_.
2. When I participate in volunteer work and community service work, I feel better as a person \_\_\_\_.
3. When I participate in volunteer and community service work, I feel as though I am contributing to make society better for all people \_\_\_\_.
4. I feel that children should become more actively involved in community and volunteer work \_\_\_\_.
5. When I participate in volunteer or community service work, I feel as though I am more capable of accomplishing other types of goals in my life \_\_\_\_.
6. When I participate in volunteer or community service work, I feel as though my relationships with other people also improve \_\_\_\_.
7. When I participate in volunteer or community service work, I like working outside and enjoy how the activity makes my body feel physically \_\_\_\_.
8. I feel that participating in volunteer community service work has also improved my academic performance \_\_\_\_.
9. When working as a volunteer in the community, I feel that my sense of pride for the community and my school has also increased \_\_\_\_.
10. I feel that community service work has helped me to understand other people and to understand different cultures \_\_\_\_.
11. I feel more entitled to certain things simply because I want them more than other people \_\_\_\_.
12. I feel as though I deserve things simply because I want them \_\_\_\_.

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