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# Expanding financial education and planning opportunities through service-learning

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the impact a service-learning activity, structured around the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program, has on students' intentions to participate in, and organize, pro bono activities in the future as financial planning professionals. Data were collected from a sample of 66 student participants who were studying financial planning and enrolled in courses that had significant service-learning requirements (~20 hours of service with 20 hours of preparation). Using a pre- and post-service experimental design, results indicated statistically significant changes in students' intentions to participate in and organize pro bono activities as professionals. © 2009 Academy of Financial Services. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

The financial planning profession currently serves only a small segment of the population. Virtually all low-income households, and many middle-income households, lack access to professional financial planners who act as fiduciaries for their clients. The financial marketplace is becoming increasingly complex and consumers are bearing a greater proportion of the responsibility and risk. Many individuals, however, do not understand basic personal finance topics such as employee benefits, income tax planning, risk management, long-term

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investing, or the role financial planning plays in achieving future financial goals and long-term financial well-being. Recent turmoil in the capital markets, and subsequently individual investors' portfolios, underscores this lack of knowledge and imprudent behavior on the part of some individuals. This may be especially true for populations currently underserved by the financial planning profession such as low and moderate-income households.

Given predominant business models in financial planning, the economic incentive to work with individuals with low to moderate-income or wealth is relatively small compared to the payoff for working with high-income and high-net-worth households. Eighty-nine percent of financial planners work exclusively with clients with net worth greater than $250,000 (Walters, 2007). Pro bono efforts are currently underway in many parts of the country to address this very issue. Pro bono work not only addresses the needs of underserved populations, but also furthers the establishment of financial planning as a profession.

Many individuals view a discipline's commitment toward pro bono work as an integral component in the emergence of a profession and as the highest ideal of an established profession (Lardent, 2000). Over the course of careers, even modest commitments to pro bono efforts could have dramatic impacts on individuals, communities, and the development of financial planning as a widely recognized profession. The American bar's commitment to make legal service available "pro bono publico" has helped the legal profession gain public support and improved reputation. This has occurred even with the majority of lawyers not participating in pro bono work at all and the average for individuals making up the entire bar being less than a half hour per week (Rhode, 2003). Just as the system of pro bono has allowed many individuals who would have otherwise been priced out of the legal system obtain justice, the continued movement toward pro bono work among financial planning professionals can bring financial planning services to tens of thousands of individuals and families who are otherwise unable to afford those services and enhance these individuals' long-term financial well being.

The Financial Planning Association (FPA), the largest professional association representing financial planners and advocating for a more widespread public recognition of financial planning as a profession, has initiated a number of pro bono programs in collaboration with other financial service organizations (e.g., Project for Financial Independence and FPA National Financial Planning Support Center). The National Association of Personal Financial Advisors (NAPFA) is also sponsoring pro bono events for its association members. The work of FPA and NAPFA to develop the infrastructure for planners to engage in pro bono services is a significant step in expanding pro bono efforts and earning social capital within the greater community. However, further research is required to understand what additional measures can be taken to increase participation in pro bono work among individual financial planners.

The number of university degree programs in financial planning has grown substantially over the past 20 years, leading to hundreds of new graduates each year. How academic programs are structured and what is included in their curricula can have lasting effects on the professionals that come out of those programs. These students, who are the next generation of financial planners, are at a particularly impressionable developmental stage of their lives as they are beginning to solidify their identity and internalize the norms of their future profession. An abundance of research literature over the past decade has substantiated the significant effects that college has on students, including their attitudes toward community service, fairness, and justice (see Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). If financial planning students participate in community service work during their academic tenure, perhaps they will be more likely to do so during their tenure as a professional in the form of pro bono work. Perhaps they will even be more likely to take leadership roles in the development of pro bono opportunities in which planners around them could participate. This paper is the first to address these questions relating to pro bono work in the financial planning profession.

## 2. Review of literature

### *2.1. Community based financial education*

A common form of pro bono work engaged in by financial planners is offering financial education. Even in for-profit endeavors, an important component of the financial planning process is providing individualized financial education to clients. Opportunities to provide and receive financial education exist in a wide range of settings, including the workplace; primary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions; community agencies; cooperative extension; non-profit organizations; and churches to name just a few. Financial education offered through these channels is most commonly delivered in group settings where key concepts are presented (Fox, Bartholomae, and Lee, 2005; Lyons, Palmer, Jayaratne, and Sherpf, 2006). Large numbers of individuals have been positively impacted through these channels, and awareness of personal finance issues has increased. Many studies have sought to document the impact of such education (i.e., Bernheim and Garrett, 2003; Bernheim, Garrett, and Maki, 2001; Kim & Garman, 2003; Lyons, Chang, and Sherpf, 2007; Staten, Elliehausen, and Lundquist, 2002).

The impact of financial education has been questioned by others because of data limitations and research design (Choi, Laibson, Madrian, and Metrick, 2004; Willis, 2008). Willis (2008) argues that financial education alone does not lead to improved financial practices with respect to more advanced financial decisions because of the complexity associated with those decisions (i.e., retirement savings). Choi et al. (2004) also find that simple education, while improving observable retirement savings behavior, is less effective when compared to other strategies such as automatic enrollment. Based on an extensive review of research findings, Willis suggests that in situations involving complex financial decisions, one-on-one education and planning resulted in superior outcomes. Willis further suggests that policies and programs that expand opportunities for one-on-one consultation with competent advisors serving in a pro bono capacity may yield greater societal benefits than simply focusing on group education alone. Consistent with Willis' position, Thaler and Benartzi (2004) also note that the benefit of individual consultation with a competent financial advisor makes a substantial difference in the amount and adequacy of retirement savings and that other passive education approaches have relatively muted effects. Thus, to respond in the most effective manner to the unmet financial planning and education needs of moderate and middle-income households, a vast army of willing and competent financial planners and educators is required. Employers and other concerned organizations may provide some revenue sources to fund this effort, but much of the work will likely be carried out through pro bono efforts.

### *2.2. Service-learning*

Other more established professions such as law and medicine are recognized as having an inherent culture of pro bono work. Although lawyers are often criticized for not doing enough pro bono work; they nevertheless provide a substantial amount of legal assistance to impoverished individuals and families throughout the United States (Sandfur, 2007). The field of accounting has also pursued the idea of developing a stronger pro bono arm to advance their recognition as a profession, and research within that field endorses the idea of using service-learning (S-L) as a way of educating future accounting professionals in the broader concept of public interest (McPhail, 2005). Incorporating S-L into the financial planning curriculum has been encouraged as an effective strategy to support students' development and transition into financial service professionals (Goetz, Tombs, and Hampton, 2005).

S-L as a pedagogical technique is based in Experiential Learning Theory, which purports the most effective learning takes place when a person is actively involved with an experience (Kolb, 1984). More specifically, Kolb defines experiential learning as a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 5). Recent research indicates the need for a shift to experiential learning in the classroom and provides evidence for its effectiveness and benefits over traditional models of passive learning (Ellis and Letourneau, 2001; Gold, 2002; Hakeem, 2001). S-L has become a widespread experiential learning technique for increasing the integration of the profession and classroom as students become more involved in course content by applying what they learn to real situations. Bringle and Haster's (1995) definition for S-L is often cited: S-L is a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience that allows students to (1) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (2) 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).

Myriad stakeholders have called upon higher education to facilitate the regeneration of students' civic engagement and involvement in community service (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003; Hollander, Burack, and Holland, 2001), and many universities have embraced fostering civic engagement and attitudes toward service among their students as a formal outcome (Chickering, 2006; Ehrlich, 2000). The various definitions of civic engagement or pro bono work involve the notion of actions for the common good and of improving the quality of life in society. Such definitions include phrases such as "social justice," "contributing to the public good," and "dignity for all." Individuals with more education are, when controlling for other factors (i.e., gender, race, socioeconomic status and pre-college attitudes), more likely to be involved in their communities; thus, it is known that college generally has a positive effect on students' later community involvement (Knox, Lindsay, and Kolb, 1993). In fact, compared to high school graduates, college graduates have been shown to be more than two and a half times more likely to be engaged in some form of volunteer work more than a decade after graduation. Previous research clearly illustrates that college's effects on graduates' engagement with their communities continues well past graduation (Astin, Sax, and Avalos, 1999; Sax and Astin, 1997), and may vary in degree based on many factors, such as the campus or academic program (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Hence, college is a particularly opportunistic time to instill a sense of community service among students who may later provide pro bono work as financial planning professionals.

### 2.3. S-L utilizing the volunteer income tax assistance program

The increasing complexity of the tax code, audit rates, and the potential for penalties is leading many more individuals to seek help when preparing and filing their tax returns and provides a well structured and readily implemented S-L project (Carr, 1998; Dubin, Graetz, Udell, and Wilde, 1992; O'Connor, 2001; Price and Smith, 2008). Low literacy levels among the population, particularly among low-income individuals, create greater need for tax preparation services to reduce errors and increase compliance (Barton and Jenkins, 1995; O'Connor, 2001). Dubin et al. find that as education increases, particularly beyond high school, demand for free tax preparation decreases. Hence, there exists a greater need for free tax preparation services among individuals with less formal education. Although self-prepared tax returns may be prone to mistakes, they are not unique in this regard. Mistakes abound in both free and commercially prepared tax returns. Brown (2006) indicates that 74% of commercially prepared tax returns contain an error, whereas 41% of returns prepared by volunteers have an error. Although both error rates are objectively too high, commercial preparers do not appear to have an accuracy advantage over free preparers.

Since the 1990s, the Earned Income Credit (EIC) (a refundable tax credit targeting low income households) has been expanded and modified enhancing the credit's benefits and complexity for tax filers, including the potential for onerous penalties if claimed inappropriately (O'Connor, 2001). O'Connor argues that free income tax preparation programs, particularly the Internal Revenue Service's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program, should be expanded in terms of capacity and complexity of tax returns that can be prepared to better serve the needs of low-income tax filers, particularly low-literacy filers eligible for the EIC.

For many years accounting programs in colleges and universities across the country have helped to expand free tax preparation services through utilizing the VITA program to facilitate meaningful S-L activities (Carr, 1998). As noted above, the VITA program is sponsored by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and has existed for many years. The program's goal is to provide free high-quality tax preparation and filing services to low-income tax filers. In recent years, the VITA program has focused on tax filers eligible for the EIC. Although the IRS provides a substantial amount of education, training, certification, software, and administrative support, partnering sponsor organizations are necessary to implement VITA in local communities. A significant number of accounting programs at colleges and universities throughout the nation have become partnering sponsors of VITA sites, and many accounting students prepare and file state and federal tax returns for low to moderate-income members of the community (Rama, 1998).

How VITA is incorporated into the curriculum varies widely. Strupeck and Whitten

(2004) discuss common variations in implementation. At one end of the spectrum, standalone classes of one to three credit hours house the S-L project, which represents the core learning activity of the course. Such courses regularly have as a prerequisite a federal income taxation course, and in some degree program curriculums such a S-L course is required (Carr, 1998; Milani, 1998). At the opposite end of the spectrum, VITA participation is completely voluntary and is promoted as one of several opportunities for students to fulfill service hour requirements associated with honors societies or academic clubs. Strupeck and Whitten (2004) discuss the pros and cons of the two extreme forms of implementation. Where VITA is incorporated into a course for credit, the consistency of offering the S-L opportunity to students and the community is much higher and the ability to market services effectively to the community increases.

The opportunity for students to prepare tax returns onsite varies depending on several factors including how appointments are setup, whether VITA is part of a class or purely a volunteer effort, number of hours students volunteer, and demand from the community (Milani, 1998; Price and Smith, 2008; Strupeck and Whiten, 2004). At locations dependent on student volunteers unaffiliated with an academic course, student participants prepare approximately 50% more tax returns than students who participate in VITA as part of a course (Milani, 1998; Strupeck and Whitten, 2004). One reason for the difference is the low number of student volunteers relative to the demand of the community at unaffiliated sites.

Most S-L courses that utilize the VITA program have students commit approximately 30 hours of service time, broken up into three to four hour sessions beginning in February and extending to March or April. While S-L participants may be scheduled for 30 hours, they are not necessarily busy all of that time. Walk-in VITA locations, the most common form of university-sponsored VITA sites, require no appointments. This necessitates S-L participants' presence, but does not ensure that the community will demand services during these times, resulting in idle time for the S-L participant. VITA locations requiring an appointment have little volunteer downtime, but do increase the administrative time commitment (Price and Smith, 2008). The unstructured downtime between clients is also developmentally beneficial to the S-L participants in that greater camaraderie among the students and faculty is created (Strupeck and Whitten, 2004). Nevertheless, an important consideration in the design of the project is balancing the number of S-L participants with the demand from community clientele. Price and Smith (2008) also note that "volunteers, even non-student volunteers, appear to work better in teams of at least two" (p. 51). Pairing more knowledgeable students with less experienced students when many are involved is common and utilizes more students while creating a more comfortable S-L environment (Carr, 1998; Milani, 1998).

Student learning and development outcomes from VITA-based, S-L projects are similar to outcomes associated with other S-L projects. Carr (1998) finds student skill development from participation in VITA in the following areas: (1) technical skills relating to tax law proficiency and work review; (2) communication skills, both verbal and written derived from client interactions, and reflective journal and paper assignments; (3) interpersonal skills developed through teamwork; and (4) personal capacities relating to self-confidence, social issues, and ethical awareness. Anecdotal evidence gathered by Milani (1998) suggests that students continue participating in VITA in their home communities after completing their degrees. Whether these intentions for continued professional service to the community existed before the student's participation in VITA, or were rather a result of the VITA participation is unknown. The identification of what specific factors increase intentions to later engage in pro bono work would be beneficial from both theoretical and practical standpoints.

### 2.4. Hypothesis

The general hypothesis of this study is that participation in S-L activities, as a component of financial planning coursework, increases students' intentions to participate in pro bono activities as financial planning professionals. More specifically, the hypothesis is broken down into four parts. First, it is hypothesized that participation in S-L activities will increase students' pro bono intentions to engage in activities similar to the ones performed for course credit (e.g., in this case volunteer income tax preparation and associated financial planning activities). To assess this, students were asked the following question before and after their participation in the S-L activity, "Once you graduate and begin working, how likely are you to participate in VITA, or other similar tax preparation programs sponsored by the IRS and local community organizations?" Volunteering in VITA as a professional is considered a form of pro bono work for this study because many opportunities for financial planning can be identified and discussed based on an individual's tax return and associated source documents.

Second, it is hypothesized that students' intentions to engage in general financial planning pro bono work, or work not specifically performed as part of their S-L activity, will also increase as a result of the S-L activity. The second hypothesis was tested using the following question on both the pre- and post-VITA surveys, "Once you graduate and begin working, how likely are you to participate in pro bono (providing professional services for free to individuals who otherwise could not afford to receive your services) activities that have already been arranged and organized?"

The next two parts of the hypothesis relate to intentions to organize pro bono efforts for other volunteers. The first of those hypothesizes that exposure to S-L activities in a financial planning program will increase students' intentions to organize pro bono activities similar to the S-L activities performed as part of their coursework. Finally, S-L participation will increase students' intentions to organize general pro bono financial planning events that are not directly associated with the S-L activities engaged in as part of the students' coursework.

## 3. Participants and data collection

### 3.1. Participants

Participants for this study are from a convenience sample of students at a Southeastern United States university. Nearly all of the students participating in the study are declared or intended majors in financial planning. Student participants are drawn from two courses, a survey of financial planning course and a tax planning course. In both classes, students are required to complete either a S-L activity involving participating in the VITA program or a term paper on current and proposed income tax policies in the United States. All students elected the S-L project.

The S-L requirement is similar for both of the courses. Students must become certified through the IRS *Link'n Learn* program. Students who have never before participated in VITA are certified at the Basic level and students who have participated in VITA before become certified at the Intermediate level within the first three weeks of the spring semester. By the end of the S-L activity, students are to increase their certification one level, that is, intermediate to advanced.

The survey of financial planning course is the first major-related course requirement in the financial planning program. Generally, students in this course have never taken any prior tax or financial planning courses. In contrast, students in the tax planning course have taken several financial planning courses, and approximately one-third of these students participated in the S-L project involving VITA the prior year while taking the survey of financial planning course. Throughout the project, students work in pairs. Experienced and inexperienced students are paired with one another, as available, until first-year VITA participants feel sufficiently confident to be paired with another first-year VITA participant. S-L participant partnerships are also structured so that one participant is from the survey course and the other is from the tax planning course. Ample supervision is provided to the students during the tax preparation sessions and three quality checkpoints are embedded in the process.

### 3.2. S-L project

VITA programs provide free income tax preparation and filing services to low and moderate-income households. VITA programs often target households eligible for the EIC, which phases out completely with earned income or adjusted gross income of $39,783 in 2007 for married filing jointly tax filers. The IRS promotes and certifies VITA sites while local community members coordinate and direct each site. Common partnering sponsor organizations of VITA sites include churches, community centers, public libraries, military bases, credit unions, and colleges and universities. Volunteers can participate after obtaining certification through the IRS. In addition to targeting individuals with low to moderate-income, the VITA program also places restrictions on serving individuals with depreciable assets, rental property, complex small businesses, and alternative minimum tax liability. Price and Smith (2008) provide a thorough review of the education, training, certification, software, and administrative support functions provided by the IRS in support of VITA partnering sponsors. In addition to the VITA program, the IRS also administers the Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE) program, in which AARP is the main partnering sponsor. TCE sites target individuals who are over 60.

Tax preparation assistance was chosen as the S-L activity for this study because several financial planning strategies can be identified during the tax preparation process and there is broad demand for income tax preparation assistance. In addition to tax preparation, information is given to tax filers about the Retirement Savings Tax Credit (RSTC). The RSTC is based on voluntary contributions to qualifying retirement savings accounts. S-L participants are instructed to discuss potential benefits of the RSTC with clients. S-L participants are also trained to discuss with clients the financial planning benefits of flexible spending accounts in situations where medical expenses occurred regularly, but where not otherwise deductible.

The authors VITA program is sponsored by a community coalition including two community development corporations, the city policy department, two credit unions, and the financial planning program at the university. VITA volunteers consist of community volunteers and financial planning students participating in the S-L activity. S-L participants are assigned to work at university and community sponsored locations and participate in coalition-wide training meetings. In addition to the VITA coalition sites, students also work at an AARP TCE site. Because of diverse assignments, student participants are able to observe the varied operations and roles of the coalition.

Electronic-mail announcements, newspaper articles, and posters are distributed throughout the community to market the VITA program and services being provided. There are five different VITA site locations staffed entirely by students with faculty and a credit union representative serving as supervisors and quality reviewers. These sites operate during the last week of January and the month of February and are located throughout the community. There were 253 federal tax returns for the 2007 tax year completed at these sites with a similar number of state returns also completed. In addition to these sites, S-L participants also work at two other tax preparation sites. One site is sponsored by the VITA community coalition and the other site is the AARP TCE site. These sites are open to the public beginning the last week of January through the second week of April; however, students are only assigned to work at these sites from January through the first week of March, corresponding with the peak filing time for low-income tax filers. During this time, S-L participants comprise the majority of volunteers at the coalition VITA site. Approximately 450 additional federal tax returns are prepared and filed at the coalition site and S-L participants assist with a significant proportion of these returns.

### *3.3. Participant recruitment and data collection*

Students are invited to participate in research regarding the S-L activity at the start of the project. Students receive a nominal amount of extra credit to complete the research surveys. No extra credit is received for the S-L activity itself. Students complete a consent form and the initial survey just before beginning client services. Students are asked to provide a unique identification phrase so that pre- and post-service surveys can be matched. The initial survey asks students about current and past volunteer activities and intentions, as well as intentions to both participate in, and organize or create, pro bono efforts as professionals. The pre-service survey also includes control scales assessing altruism (Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken, 1981) and religiosity (Gladding, 1977; Gladding, Lewis, and Adkins, 1981; James, Thames, Bhalla, and Cornwell, 2003). The scales are included to control for differing predispositions between participants toward providing service to others.

After the final scheduled VITA session is completed, and students have written a reflective writing assignment on the S-L project, students are given a post-service survey. The survey again asks students about their intentions to both participate in, and organize or create, pro bono efforts as professionals; current service-oriented activities and intentions, and also includes an additional control scale assessing social desirability (Strahan, 2007). The social desirability scale is included to control for participants seeking to provide socially desirable responses rather than truthful responses to the question? Of the 80 students participating in the S-L project, 66 completed pre- and post-service surveys that could be matched and used for data analysis. Nineteen respondents had previously participated in VITA.

The survey asks four questions relating to future pro bono intentions as professionals. These questions specifically address students' intentions to (1) participate in VITA as professionals; (2) participate in general financial planning pro bono work; (3) organize VITA pro bono opportunities for other professionals; and (4) organize general financial planning related pro bono work in which other professionals can volunteer. Pro bono work in this study is defined as providing professional services for free to individuals who otherwise could not afford the services. A five-point Likert scale is used to capture students' responses to intentions to participate in pro bono activities as professionals. The scale ranges from "1 – very unlikely" to "5 – very likely." After the completion of the survey, students are debriefed regarding their experiences while serving in the community as well as the idea of pro bono work and their thoughts about whether it is an important characteristic of a profession.

### *3.4. Analysis*

Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. Several characteristics of the data violate standard parametric statistical assumptions. The most notable is the unequal interval response scale used to assess students' intentions as professionals. Whereas the scale is ordinal, the perceived interval between "4 – likely" and "5 – very likely" may be perceived differently among students. Even among the same students, the perceived difference between "1 – very unlikely" and "2 – unlikely" may be different than the perceived difference between "2 – unlikely" and "3 – neutral." Further, no assumption is made that intentions to engage in pro bono work are normally distributed within the general undergraduate population. To properly account for the data characteristics, the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Rank test is used to determine the significance of pre- and post-service differences in intentions to engage in the above-mentioned four forms of pro bono work. Pre- and post-service differences in intentions to engage in pro bono work are also assessed by class and prior VITA participation (Table 1).

Participant dispositions toward altruism, religiosity, and social desirability are assessed using established instruments (Gladding, Lewis, and Adkins, 1981; Rushton, Chrisjohn, and Fekken, 1981; Strahan, 2007). Cronbach's $\alpha$ is calculated for the altruism and religiosity scales for this sample. Pre- and post-service responses, and the difference between post- and pre-service responses, to the various questions relating to intentions to engage in pro bono work as professionals are compared with students' scores on the altruism, social desirability, and religiosity instruments using the Spearman correlation coefficient.

As discussed above, 19 of the 66 students in this study have previously participated in VITA. Fifteen of these 19 students are in the income tax course and participated in VITA through a similar S-L project while they were enrolled in the survey class the previous year. Prior participation in a VITA based S-L project may have affected students' intentions to volunteer for and organize pro bono activities as professionals as a result of the service

Table 1 Sample characteristics and students' intentions to engage in pro bono work as professionals before and after participating in VITA ($N = 66$)

| Characteristic | Percent | Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | | | |
| Male | 65.2 | | |
| Female | 34.8 | | |
| Class | | | |
| Survey of financial planning | 36.4 | | |
| Income tax planning | 63.6 | | |
| Prior VITA participation | | | |
| No | 71.2 | | |
| Yes | 28.8 | | |
| Pre-VITA intentions toward professional pro bono work[a] | | | |
| Intention to participate in VITA as professional | | 2.6 | 1.0 |
| Intention to participate in general pro bono work | | 3.7 | 0.9 |
| Intention to organize VITA as a professional | | 2.4 | 1.0 |
| Intention to organize general pro bono work | | 2.8 | 0.9 |
| Post-VITA intentions toward professional pro bono work[a] | | | |
| Intention to participate in VITA as professional | | 3.6 | 1.0 |
| Intention to participate in general pro bono work | | 4.1 | 0.9 |
| Intention to organize VITA as a professional | | 3.0 | 1.1 |
| Intention to organize general pro bono work | | 3.4 | 1.1 |

[a] Intentions are measured on a five point Likert scale with five representing "very likely" and one representing "very unlikely."

experience, written reflection, and discussion with peers regarding the S-L projects. Students' attitudes may also change with age, college experience, or progression through the financial planning program curriculum. To determine the effects that prior VITA participation through a S-L course and greater collegiate experience have on intentions to engage in and organize pro bono work as professionals the Kruskal-Wallis test is used to identify differences in pre-VITA intentions to engage in pro bono work. Maturation through collegiate experience is approximated by examining students without VITA experience in the introductory survey course and the senior level tax planning course. Paired groupings are compared and alpha is adjusted based on Conover's (1999) non-parametric post hoc technique for multiple comparisons of independent samples.

## 4. Results

### *4.1. Sample characteristics and change in intentions*

The ending sample size for this study is 66. Of these students, ~65% are male. Twenty-four of the 66 are enrolled in the survey of financial planning class and 42 were enrolled in the tax planning course. Just over one-quarter of the sample had previously participated in VITA.

Students' intentions to participate in pro bono work as professionals are higher after completing the S-L activity. Fig. 1 illustrates this shift for each of the four questions.

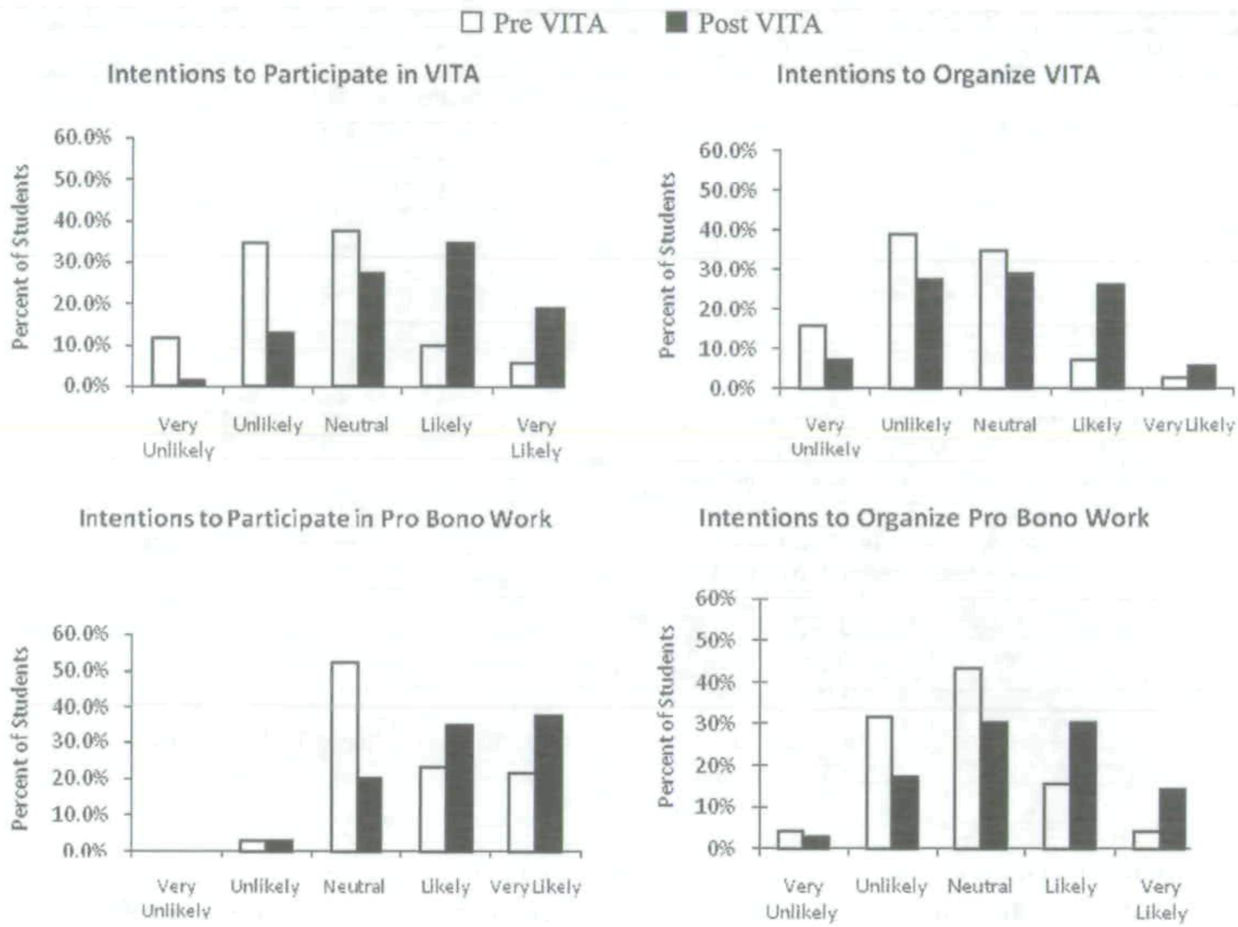


Fig. 1. Comparison of pre- and post-VITA categorical responses regarding intentions to participate in, or organize, pro bono work as professionals ($N = 66$)

Initially, 16% of students said they were "likely" or "very likely" to participate as professionals in VITA. After providing the service, the proportion of students who report they are "likely" or "very likely" to participate in VITA as professionals increased to 54%. Students' initial intent to participate in general pro bono work as financial planning professionals is positively skewed. Prior to completing the S-L activity, nearly 45% of students report that they planned to provide some pro bono work as a professional. Upon completion of the activity, over 70% of students intend to participate in some form of pro bono work as financial planning professionals. Similar, but less pronounced shifts also occur with regards to students' intentions to organize VITA sites and other financial planning pro bono activities as professionals.

The change in intentions to engage in pro bono work as professionals is statistically significant with regard to both pro bono work similar to the S-L activity and for pro bono work unrelated to the S-L activity. Intentions to volunteer as professionals in VITA programs and other financial planning pro bono activities increase significantly based on the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test using paired samples. Results of the tests are presented in Table 2. Significant increases are also observed among participants' intentions to organize VITA

Table 2 Pre and post-VITA comparison of students' intentions to engage in pro bono work as professionals, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Paired Test ($N$ = 66)

| Intended behavior | Grouping | Post- or pre-change | | | W | $\sigma_w$ | z |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Decrease | Increase | No change | | | |
| Intention to participate in VITA as a professional. | All students | 4 | 44 | 18 | 976 | 195.00 | 5.15*** |
| | Females | 2 | 15 | 6 | 129 | 42.25 | 3.16*** |
| | Males | 2 | 29 | 12 | 408 | 102.06 | 4.09*** |
| | Survey class | 1 | 18 | 5 | 180 | 49.70 | 3.68*** |
| | Tax class | 3 | 26 | 13 | 317 | 92.49 | 3.57*** |
| Intention to participate in general pro bono work as a professional. | All students | 10 | 31 | 25 | 521 | 154.34 | 3.61*** |
| | Females | 1 | 17 | 5 | 157 | 45.92 | 3.58*** |
| | Males | 9 | 14 | 20 | 87 | 65.76 | 1.44 |
| | Survey class | 3 | 14 | 7 | 117 | 42.25 | 2.86** |
| | Tax class | 7 | 17 | 18 | 139 | 70.00 | 2.19* |
| Intention to organize VITA as a professional. | All students | 13 | 31 | 22 | 544 | 171.38 | 3.28*** |
| | Females | 4 | 10 | 9 | 65 | 31.86 | 2.11* |
| | Males | 9 | 21 | 13 | 238 | 97.24 | 2.53** |
| | Survey class | 5 | 15 | 4 | 131 | 53.57 | 2.51** |
| | Tax class | 8 | 16 | 21 | 142 | 70.00 | 2.11* |
| Intention to organize pro bono work as a professional. | All Students | 10 | 30 | 26 | 514 | 148.80 | 3.58*** |
| | Females | 2 | 11 | 10 | 71 | 28.62 | 2.57** |
| | Males | 8 | 19 | 16 | 211 | 83.25 | 2.62** |
| | Survey class | 3 | 16 | 5 | 154 | 49.70 | 3.18*** |
| | Tax class | 7 | 14 | 18 | 99 | 57.54 | 1.80* |

Single tailed test, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. $W$ greater than zero indicates higher post-VITA relative to pre-VITA intentions. When students who have previously engaged in VITA are excluded from the analysis, the pattern of results is identical except for males intentions to participate in general pro bono work and females intentions to organize VITA.

sites, as well as general pro bono activities with $T = -3.28$, $p < .001$ and $T = -3.58$, $p < .001$, respectively.

Changes in intentions to engage in pro bono work are consistently observed across all sub groupings of the sample population. Two exceptions to the consistent pattern of greater intentions to volunteer as professionals are observed. First, male students are no more likely to participate in general financial planning pro bono work as professionals following the S-L activity. Second, students in the tax planning class are no more likely to organize general financial planning pro bono activities after participating in the S-L activity. Aside from these two findings, the increase in intentions is observable to some extent among all students and sub groupings.

The religiosity and altruism scales have Cronbach's $\alpha$ scores of 0.81 and 0.79, respectively, for this sample, which indicates adequate reliability of the scales in assessing students' attitudes regarding religiosity and altruism. Student responses on each scale are aggregated into a single score for the respective scale. Spearman correlations are estimated between students' attitudes regarding religiosity, altruism, and social desirability and the change in students' intentions to participate in VITA, organize VITA, volunteer in general pro bono activities, and organize general pro bono efforts as professionals. There are no statistically significant associations between religiosity, altruism, and social desirability and students' observed change in intentions to volunteer for or organize pro bono efforts as professionals. Even the highest correlation observed, which is between altruism and change in intentions to participate in VITA as professionals is quite low ($r = -0.22$, $p = .09$).

### 4.2. *Effect of prior VITA participation*

Some students in the sample have previously participated in VITA. Table 3 presents the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test for each class after excluding students who had previously participated in VITA. It also presents results for only those students who had previously participated in VITA. For students in both the survey class and income tax planning class intentions to volunteer for VITA, participate in general pro bono work, organize VITA, and organize other pro bono activities as professionals increase significantly after completing the S-L activity. These results are consistent with those found in Table 2 using the full sample. An entirely different pattern emerges for students who have previously participated in VITA. An absence of statistically significant change in intentions to engage in pro bono work is present for prior VITA participants. The consistency of statistical insignificance contrasts findings for other groupings in the sample population.

A Kruskal-Wallis test using students' initial intentions to engage in pro bono activities as professionals with independent groupings based on prior VITA participation through a S-L course and the class in which students are enrolled is used to determine whether observable differences existed initially between junior-level and senior-level students as a result of collegiate experience and progression through the financial planning program or prior VITA participation. Table 4 presents the results of the Kruskal-Wallis test. Statistically significant differences are evident in pre-service intentions to volunteer for general pro bono work as professionals between the three groups. Post hoc analysis of the Kruskal-Wallis results using Conover's (1999) multiple comparisons technique indicate that students who had previously

Table 3 Pre and post-VITA comparison of students' intentions to engage in pro bono work isolating students with prior VITA experience, Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Paired Test ($N = 66$)

| Intended behavior | Grouping | Post- or pre-change | | | $W^a$ | $\sigma_W$ | z |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Decrease | Increase | No change | | | |
| Volunteer VITA | Survey class[b] | 1 | 15 | 4 | 128 | 49.70 | 3.35*** |
| | Tax class[b] | 0 | 20 | 7 | 210 | 53.57 | 4.10*** |
| | Prior VITA | 3 | 9 | 7 | 32 | 25.50 | 1.29 |
| Volunteer general pro bono work | Survey class | 2 | 11 | 7 | 73 | 42.25 | 2.62** |
| | Tax class | 1 | 15 | 11 | 121 | 38.68 | 3.40*** |
| | Prior VITA | 7 | 5 | 7 | -6 | 25.50 | 0.30 |
| Organize VITA | Survey class | 5 | 11 | 4 | 71 | 53.57 | 1.89* |
| | Tax class | 3 | 12 | 12 | 87 | 35.21 | 2.56** |
| | Prior VITA | 5 | 8 | 6 | 34 | 28.62 | 1.22 |
| Organize general pro bono work | Survey class | 3 | 14 | 3 | 120 | 49.70 | 2.92** |
| | Tax class | 1 | 9 | 17 | 47 | 19.62 | 2.49** |
| | Prior VITA | 6 | 7 | 6 | 19 | 28.62 | 0.70 |

Single tailed test, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. [a]$W$ greater than zero indicates higher post-VITA intentions relative to pre-VITA intentions. [b]Students who have previously participated in VITA are excluded from these groups.

participated in VITA through a S-L project have statistically significantly higher initial intentions to participate in general pro bono activities as professionals compared to students in both the tax planning and survey classes without such prior S-L experience. These differences are not observable regarding intentions to volunteer for VITA or organize pro bono activities. Higher initial intentions to participate in general pro bono work may have

Table 4 Kruskal-Wallis comparison of pre-VITA intentions to engage in pro bono work as professionals between prior S-L VITA participants, survey class, and tax planning class ($N = 62$)

| Intended behavior | Independent groups[a] | $N$ | Mean Rank | $df$ | $\chi^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Volunteer in VITA | Prior VITA S-L experience | 15 | 38.73 | 2 | 3.70 |
| | Survey class | 20 | 27.85 | | |
| | Tax planning class | 27 | 30.19 | | |
| Volunteer in general pro bono work | Prior VITA S-L experience | 15 | 42.23 | 2 | 8.28* |
| | Survey class | 20 | 27.52 | | |
| | Tax planning class | 27 | 28.58 | | |
| Organize VITA | Prior VITA S-L experience | 15 | 32.53 | 2 | 0.83 |
| | Survey class | 20 | 33.70 | | |
| | Tax planning class | 27 | 29.30 | | |
| Organize general pro bono work | Prior VITA S-L experience | 15 | 37.53 | 2 | 2.52 |
| | Survey class | 20 | 29.09 | | |
| | Tax planning class | 27 | 30.22 | | |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. [a]The sample is divided into three independent groups consisting of students who have previously participated in VITA through a S-L project and students enrolled in either the survey class or tax planning class after excluding any students who have ever participated in VITA. Fifteen of the 19 students with prior VITA experience were included in the analysis because it was determined that their prior experience was a S-L course. Four students enrolled in the survey class with prior VITA experience were excluded from the sample since it was unknown where their VITA experience occurred.

contributed to the statistically insignificant changes in intentions from pre-VITA to post-VITA for students who had previously participated in VITA.

There are no statistically significant differences in pre-service intentions to volunteer for VITA, participate in general pro bono work, organize VITA, or organize general pro bono work between students in the introductory survey course and those in the upper level income tax planning course. Based on the results of this test, no differences are observable between junior-level students just starting the financial planning curriculum and senior-level students nearing the completion of the curriculum regarding their initial intentions to engage in pro bono work.

## 5. Discussion and implications

Results generally support the hypothesis that participation in S-L activities as part of a class increases students' intentions to volunteer and organize pro bono efforts as professionals. Students' intentions to engage in future pro bono work increases in regards to pro bono work that is similar to and different from the activities associated with the S-L project.

The increase in students' intentions to participate as professionals in a variety of roles relating to pro bono activities provides evidence that for the population studied, S-L activities in college can affect individuals' attitudes and preferences toward pro bono work as future professionals. The results also indicate that S-L participation influences students' attitudes towards engaging in all types of pro bono activities, not just in those activities with which they are familiar. Findings suggest that other well-structured S-L activities would have similar effects on students' attitudes toward pro bono work as professionals.

In addition to increasing intentions to volunteer, findings indicate S-L involvement increases students' intentions to organize pro bono activities later as professionals. The increased intention to organize pro bono efforts is observed for activities similar to the S-L project and for general pro bono endeavors. Given this finding, where S-L activities in financial planning are developed and implemented, it may be beneficial to some students, faculty, and the profession for students to assist with the planning and administration of S-L projects so that students can more easily spearhead pro bono efforts later in their careers.

The S-L activity appears to significantly increase the pro bono intentions of students in both the survey class and the income tax planning class who had not previously participated in VITA. While students in the survey class had only introductory lectures on federal income taxation, the effects of participating in the S-L activity appear to be similar to those experienced by students in the income tax planning course, both in regard to participating in VITA as a professional and volunteering for other financial planning projects. With the one exception noted above, participating in VITA resulted in similar effects on male and female students.

Although the observations from this study are limited to the time immediately following the conclusion of the S-L project, the comparison of initial pro bono intentions between returning VITA volunteers and first-time volunteers suggests that the shift in preference toward volunteering for general pro bono work is lasting. Approximately one year after participating in a VITA based S-L activity, students reported significantly higher intentions to participate in general pro bono work as professionals than did their first-time counterparts. Maturation resulting from additional collegiate experience and greater exposure to financial planning curriculum may explain the higher initial intentions among the students who had previously participated in VITA; however, this is unlikely based on the Mann-Whitney results. When students with prior VITA experience were excluded from the sample, there were no statistical differences between the initial intentions to engage in pro bono work between students in the survey class, who are just entering the financial planning program, and those students in the tax planning class, who are typically one semester away from graduation. The similarity in responses between these two groups suggests that maturation resulting from general collegiate experiences and progression through the financial planning program does not account for the higher initial intentions to volunteer for VITA and other pro bono activities found among students who had previously participated in VITA.

Clearly, additional research is necessary to establish the long-term effect that S-L activities have on future pro bono participation and students' learning outcomes as well as the community's perceptions of students as financial educators and service providers. Follow-up surveys with student participants in this study will help document whether intentions to engage in pro bono work as professionals were converted into actions. Multi-institutional studies utilizing control groups are necessary to increase the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, learning outcomes associated with the community education and student-service providers resulting from S-L activities in financial planning need to be evaluated to document the academic and community benefits of this pedagogy.

The VITA program provides an effective and dynamic S-L opportunity for financial planning students. Students come together with community volunteers and community members for a shared experience in furthering their understanding of the United States income tax system and planning opportunities it presents for families and individuals. For students in this study, participation in such activities not only provided immediate satisfaction, but also affected their intentions to engage in, and organize, pro bono efforts in the future.

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