

Developing and Evaluating a Student Scholars Program to Engage Students with the University's Public Service and Outreach Mission

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Abstract

A "student scholars" program was developed to engage undergraduates at a large, public, land-grant research university with its public service and outreach mission, through cohort meetings, supervised internships, and site visits. Qualitative and pre-/post-participation quantitative data from the first cohort of 10 students show that participants gained deeper understanding of the university's public service and outreach mission, purpose, and activities, and developed skills appropriate to engaging in this work themselves. Such a program holds promise for creating a core of informed student advocates for the university's public service and outreach mission and engagement work as well as improving these students' own competencies and motivations for incorporating public service and outreach into their academic and professional careers.

Introduction

Management of the intersections between a university's educational and civic engagement missions is a key leadership challenge for higher education (Plater, 2004). Although the civic, community engagement, and public service elements of institutions of higher education are often touted as among their most important aspects (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Kellogg Commission, 2001; Stanton, 2008), these elements may not be integrated with the institutions' teaching and research missions, or apparent to students. Indeed, a national study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Dey, Barnhardt, Antonaros, Ott, & Holsapple, 2009) suggested that students are less aware than are faculty and administrators of both the actual practices of engagement and the importance their university attaches to its engagement work. Over 57% of students surveyed felt that contributing to the larger community should be a major focus of their institution, but only 46% believed it actually was such a focus (p. 8). Overall, less than a third of students believed that their campuses had helped them become more aware of the importance of community engagement, and even fewer felt their campuses helped

them “learn the skills necessary to effectively change society for the better” (p. 12). Plater (2004) asserts that “civic engagement is an explicit or implicit part of every institution’s mission, and it is the role of academic leaders to explain this mission internally to their community of faculty, staff, and students and to their many external constituents” (p. 7). The program described in this article represents a promising example of how the “chain of purpose and authority from mission to an articulated program of civic engagement to specific programs and practices” (p. 8) can develop in response to this challenge.

Context of the Study

The University of Georgia (UGA) is a large (almost 35,000-student) public research university located in a high-poverty city of about 116,000 residents in the southeastern United States. It is a land- and sea-grant institution and a 2010 recipient of the Carnegie Community Engagement classification whose overall mission includes not only teaching and research, but also “a commitment to excellence in public service, economic development, and technical assistance activities designed to address the strategic needs of the state” (*University of Georgia, 2010*). The university’s vice president for public service and outreach is tasked with giving leadership to these initiatives, especially in eight standalone units that provide a range of services: community and economic development, governmental training, marine extension and education, small business support, continuing education, and more.

Reports such as the Kellogg Commission’s *Returning to our Roots* (2001) have outlined some of the challenges presently facing institutions of higher education, including perceived “unresponsiveness” to relevant public issues as well as “long-term financial constraints and demands for affordability and cost containment” (p. 13). These challenges ring true for the University of Georgia. Immediately prior to the start of this program, declining state revenues had resulted in significant cuts to the university’s state-funded budget allocations—a decrease in allocations of some 26% in 3 years, with about \$1 million cut specifically from public service and outreach. In a context of furloughs, additional mid-year mandated and threatened cuts, and public showdowns between members of the legislature and the university system, UGA struggled to meet the new budget reality.

In April 2010, an interim vice president for public service and outreach was appointed. He spearheaded a strategic planning

process for UGA's public service and outreach, resulting in a new 5-year strategic plan released that September which was intended to bolster and improve the efficiency, relevance, and reach of public service and outreach. One explicit action step was to "establish a public service scholars program" for undergraduate students to learn more about UGA's land-grant mission and public service and outreach units. This was characterized broadly in the Strategic Plan (2010) as a program that would "allow undergraduate students to engage deeply in a Public Service and Outreach initiative that addresses critical statewide needs. Students will develop an understanding of the role of public service in society, hone their civic leadership skills, and apply academic learning to public issues" (Goal 2, Strategy 2.2). Specific details of the program were to be developed and implemented by staff in UGA's Office of Service-Learning. As that office reports jointly to the vice president for public service and outreach and the vice president for instruction, it seemed strategically positioned to help connect the public service and teaching missions, though previously it had done so primarily through faculty development support rather than through direct work with undergraduates. The assistant director (the author) was assigned to develop and coordinate this Public Service and Outreach Student Scholars program, with a mandate to begin the program by January 2011.

Overview of the Program

Action steps for developing this new program included reviewing similar programs from other universities; hosting "listening" sessions with public service and outreach unit directors and public service faculty members on concerns, feasibility, fit with existing programs, and possible internship activities; investigation into the feasibility of offering course credit and/or providing a student stipend; and drafting and discussing proposals for iterative review, feedback, and eventual approval by the vice president's office. Next, logistical program elements (e.g., finalizing application and interview dates, promoting the program to appropriate campus audiences, creating a website and application materials) were put into place for a single-semester pilot program (Spring 2011).

To address concerns of some public service and outreach units regarding the preparedness of undergraduate students to work successfully with their units and clients, program eligibility criteria included having completed at least 60 credit hours and having a grade point average (GPA) of 3.0. Representatives from the public

service and outreach units participated in the screening and selection process.

Of 25 applicants for Spring 2011, 22 were invited to be interviewed. Applicants had an average GPA of 3.56, were predominantly female, and represented an ethnically diverse student body, with 11 White, eight Black, three Hispanic, and two Asian applicants. The eight public service and outreach units selected 10 participants for the inaugural program. Table 1 provides demographics for the participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographics, Spring 2011 Pilot

| Gender | Ethnicity (Self-Reported) | Anticipated Graduation Year (Self-Reported) |
|---------------|----------------------------------|--|
| 6 female | 5 White | 5 Spring 2011 |
| 4 male | 2 Hispanic | 3 Spring 2012 |
| | 1 Nigerian-American | 2 Spring 2012 |
| | 1 Vietnamese | |
| | 1 Asian Indian | |

The stated goals of the Public Service and Outreach Student Scholars program were to provide participating undergraduates with a deeper understanding of the purpose, breadth, and depth of public service and outreach at UGA through supervised service experiences with public service and outreach units and communities; to help students link their public service experiences with their career and educational goals; and to create a community of student scholars with a deeper understanding of the role of public service at UGA, in Georgia, and beyond. Program activities included an orientation lunch with the vice president and public service and outreach faculty members; weekly two-hour cohort meetings; and a paid, 150-hour internship within a selected public service and outreach unit, mentored by a public service faculty member (these mentors received a \$500 faculty development award). The weekly meetings (often hosted by a public service and outreach unit) featured public service faculty members as guest speakers, and had a thematic focus (Table 2), in which students learned about the university's engagement work, applied research, and responses to critical statewide community needs. Depending on the unit, the semester-long internships featured combinations of job shadowing, applied research, community engagement, and more. (See Table 3 for units and sample internship activities.) The program also included a spring break trip to communities in Georgia served by public service and outreach, and to the university's marine

extension coastal education center, where students toured the aquarium, took part in oyster reef restoration, and participated in applied marine science labs. Program participants and mentors were recognized at the public service and outreach annual awards luncheon, and at a dedicated end-of-semester public showcase of accomplishments and internship deliverables.

Table 2. Student Scholar Program Meeting Topics

| Session Topic | Unit(s) Involved |
|---|---|
| Orientation | Mentors from all units and Vice President |
| Overview of Public Service and Outreach (National/Campus) | Vice President's Office; Office of Service-Learning |
| Georgia's Changing Demographics | Fanning Institute; Carl Vinson Institute of Government; site visit to community partner |
| Georgia's Educational Needs | Georgia Center for Continuing Education; Fanning Institute |
| Economic Development | Small Business Development Center |
| Conservation and Natural Resources | Marine Extension; State Botanical Garden of Georgia |
| Health and Well-being | Archway Partnership |
| Relating to Public Service and Outreach to Careers | Office of Service-Learning |

Table 3. Public Service and Outreach Units and Internships

| Unit | Numbers of Internships | Sample Internship Activities |
|---|-------------------------------|--|
| Small Business Development Center | 1 | Job shadowing; consulting on business plans |
| Georgia Center for Continuing Education | 1 | Job shadowing; development and implementation of revised guidelines for state Science Fair judges |
| Archway Partnership | 2 | Community site visits; research project assessing one county's teen pregnancy prevention efforts; research project comparing county public educational initiatives |
| Carl Vinson Institute of Government | 1 | Research project on the impact of an African government's policies on small business development |
| Fanning Institute | 2 | Community site visits; development of training components and grant elements for a community education initiative |
| Office of Service-Learning | 1 | Creation of a feasibility study for a Campus-Community Kitchen at the university |
| Marine Extension | 1 (did not complete) | Research on oyster propagation |
| State Botanical Garden of Georgia | 1 | Job shadowing; development of promotional and educational materials |

Measuring the Impact of the Program

Assessment was built into the program, including institutional review board approval for using data gathered from participants and mentors for research purposes. Assessment data from the pilot semester included a pre- and post-participation online student questionnaire as well as feedback solicited from the public service and outreach faculty mentors (not included in the current analysis). Evaluation focused on the program's impact on the participants—especially their understanding of public service in general and specific to the institution—as well as on program quality more broadly.

Quantitative program impact measures were implemented prior to the start of the program and again at the end. These included three scales from pre-existing community engagement literature: the Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale, 10 items (Reeb, Katsuyama, Sammon, & Yoder, 1998); the Civic Attitudes Scale, five items (Mabry, 1998); and the Public Service Motivation Scale, 24 items with four sub-scales (*Attraction to Public Policy; Commitment to Public Interest; Compassion; Self-Sacrifice; Perry, 1996*). There were also 10 questions on participant demographics and contact information, as well as 12 statements for program-specific outcomes with 5-point Likert-type responses assessing participants' understanding of UGA's public service and outreach mission and units. (See Appendix 1 for the instruments and questions.)

Post-participation surveys included all of the above scales, as well as 4 additional open-ended questions on what participants' internships entailed, what they learned, and how public service related to their futures. Another 11 questions assessed participants' level of satisfaction with the program on a scale of 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). For the multi-item scales, a composite (mean) score was created for both pre- and post-participation for Public Service and Outreach Outcomes, the Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale, the Civic Attitudes Scale, and the Public Service Motivation Scale subscales. The composite satisfaction score (mean of all 11 satisfaction items) was calculated for post-participation only, as it was administered only then.

Data analysis included descriptive statistics and paired samples *t*-tests (using the statistical software SPSS 18.0) to investigate changes in self-reported participant knowledge pre- to post-participation. Because of the small sample size (only 9 participants completed the final assessment, with one student having dropped out toward the end of the program), low power for the pre- to post-participation analyses was a concern. Student responses to

open-ended prompts were used to help flesh out and triangulate the quantitative outcomes, and written responses to “What are the top three things you learned from taking part in this program?” were also open-coded based on emergent themes (Creswell, 1998), which were categorized and counted to give a rough indication of the prevalence of each theme.

Findings

Results focused on the impacts of participation on the students, in terms both of pre- to post-participation quantitative outcomes, and of their open-ended self-reports of what they had learned. Mean satisfaction scores with the program for all 11 items were high (no lower than 4.00 on the 5-point scale); the mean composite satisfaction score was 4.62 ($SD = .26$). In fact, for two items (satisfaction with “the program as a whole” and “the program’s impact on my understanding of public service and outreach”), all nine participants rated themselves “5/very satisfied.” Their open-ended final comments reinforced their satisfaction with the Public Service and Outreach Student Scholars program, with statements such as “It was a very meaningful experience and definitely gave me a perspective that I did not previously have about public service.” Another commented,

This was a well thought out program that served to compliment [sic] my interests and expose me to the diverse initiatives occurring at UGA regarding public service and outreach. I had no idea of how involved and spread out the university was, so to see a few of their programs was eye opening. I highly recommend it to other students.

Table 4 shows the mean scores and *t*-test results for each set of outcome variables on the Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale, Civic Attitudes Scale, and Public Service Motivation Scale subscales (Attraction to Public Policy; Commitment to Public Interest; Compassion; Self-Sacrifice), as well as the Public Service and Outreach Outcomes composite variable. Several caveats are necessary with the data. Self-report questionnaires may be susceptible to bias or validity issues. Additionally, in some of these scales, a ceiling effect may have been in place—for instance, participants’ initial civic attitudes scores averaged 4.64 on the 5-point scale, leaving little room for upward change. With only nine respondents, observed power was also low.

Table 4. Paired Samples Statistics

| Variables | Mean | N | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | t | p (2-tailed) |
|---|------|---|----------------|-----------------|--------|--------------|
| Pair 1 Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale mean pre | 8.48 | 9 | 1.519 | .506 | 2.183 | .06* |
| Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale mean post | 9.17 | 9 | .904 | .301 | | |
| Pair 2 Civic Attitudes mean pre | 4.64 | 9 | .397 | .132 | 0.316 | .76 |
| Civic Attitudes mean post | 4.69 | 9 | .362 | .121 | | |
| Pair 3 Attraction to Public Policy pre | 3.56 | 9 | .850 | .283 | 1.500 | .17 |
| Attraction to Public Policy post | 3.89 | 9 | .866 | .289 | | |
| Pair 4 Commitment to Public Interest pre | 4.09 | 9 | .679 | .226 | -0.164 | .87 |
| Commitment to Public Interest post | 4.07 | 9 | .374 | .125 | | |
| Pair 5 Compassion pre | 3.46 | 9 | .348 | .116 | 1.195 | .27 |
| Compassion post | 3.67 | 9 | .590 | .197 | | |
| Pair 6 Self-Sacrifice pre | 3.92 | 9 | .319 | .106 | -0.223 | .83 |
| Self-Sacrifice post | 3.89 | 9 | .465 | .155 | | |
| Pair 7 Public Service and Outreach Outcomes mean pre | 3.28 | 9 | .777 | .259 | 6.402 | .000* |
| Public Service and Outreach Outcomes mean post | 4.89 | 9 | .161 | .054 | | |

* $p < 0.10$

The program-specific outcomes (participants' understanding of public service and outreach at the university) showed statistically significant gains ($t = 6.402, p < 0.001$). Indeed, upon post-program administration, all participants "strongly agreed" that they were "able to describe how public service and outreach relates to the university's mission." Additionally, participants had a significantly improved self-efficacy rating for engaging with community service ($t = 2.183, p = .06$). No other pre- to post-participation ratings were statistically significant.

Participants were asked to report the "top three things" they learned through taking part in the program. Their 27 responses (three for each of the nine students) grouped into four main thematic areas (Table 5); as expected, a greater awareness of Public Service and Outreach was cited by all as a learning outcome. Nine responses highlighted self-reported improvement in professionally oriented skills, while the remaining nine comments were split between participants' reports of greater knowledge of the community and community needs, and of their own personal development.

Table 5. Thematic Responses for Learning Outcomes

| Learning Theme | No. of Responses | Sample Quote |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| Greater awareness of public service and outreach | 9 | A greater understanding of public service and outreach in general. |
| Enhanced professional skills | 9 | I learned how to conduct interviews and focus groups. |
| Improved knowledge of the community | 5 | I learned about the food access gaps that remain in the area (specifically in the aging population). |
| Self-awareness/personal development | 4 | My interests and skills can be applied to a number of different fields. |

The data sources support participants' greater understanding of public service and outreach through program participation. Likewise, their reported improved understanding of the community and of themselves, and their enhanced professional skills (Table 5), are triangulated in their statistically significant gains in self-efficacy for community service (Table 4). The hands-on internship experiences with public service and outreach units for 10 hours per week during the semester (Table 3) likely account for much of this reported improvement in their skills and comfort in taking part in public service and outreach work.

In response to another open-ended prompt about their future plans, participants likewise showed that they found many connections between their work through the program and their futures. All nine participants indicated that they planned to incorporate service into their careers or activities, with comments such as: "I now understand that even small contributions can make all the difference. I feel confident that my future community service activities will truly aid in the improvement of people's lives." Another stated,

Public service has allowed me to see what both public institutions and personal investment can do to change and improve people's lives. I intend to make this a part of my life in terms of going either into public policy, or engaging in as many service projects as I can.

Implications and Summary

Engaged institutions should "enrich students' experiences by bringing research and engagement into the curriculum and offering practical opportunities for students to prepare for the world they will enter" (*Kellogg Commission, 2001, p. 14*). Program assessment

to date suggests that this Public Service and Outreach Student Scholars program has been successful in advancing such engagement work and in meeting its specific objectives; future research is expected to continue to demonstrate impact. The participants' survey responses as well as their open-ended reflective comments show a deepened understanding of the purpose and activities of UGA's public service and outreach, and the skills needed to undertake this work.

Participants' enhanced professional skills, knowledge of the community, and self-efficacy for taking part in service indicate that the program succeeded in helping them link their public service experiences with their career and educational goals, on campus and beyond. Previous research (e.g., Perry & Wise, 1990) suggests that students with a strong sense of public interest are more likely to enter careers in the public sector, and that participation in experiential programs can enhance students' civic-mindedness beyond their pre-existing proclivities (Kirlin, 2002); thus the current program may well continue to bear future dividends for its alumni and society.

At an institutional level, formally involving undergraduates in public service experiences holds promise for reducing the gap (Dey et al., 2009) between a university's practice of civic engagement and student awareness of those activities. For a relatively modest financial investment, a cohort of students can be developed who can intelligently advocate for the importance and impact of public service and outreach, in discussions with their peers, the general public, and perhaps eventually even with policy makers. Likewise, the positive initial experiences for the public service and outreach units and faculty members who engaged with these students (while not the focus of the current study) may also make the public service and outreach units more amenable to incorporating undergraduates into their future work, further integrating the university's instructional and public service missions.

Continued assessment of the program will incorporate investigation of longer term impacts as well as the current pre- to post-participation measures, and will also include analysis of the feedback from the public service and outreach faculty mentors. Although the Student Scholars program is one of the strategic plan initiatives for 2010–2015, its continued funding and sustainability across leadership changes will likely depend on its ability to continue to demonstrate impact on students, faculty, communities, and the institution. Indeed, the interim vice president who initiated this program has left the university and a new permanent vice president is in place; thus, ensuring that the program's outcomes are disseminated and that its impact is visible to the participants,

public service and outreach units, and campus leadership is important for its continued support and implementation.

Pilot participants' (and faculty mentors') feedback has also led to modifications in the program's activities. Specifically, an end-of-program listening session, as well as the open-ended post-participation survey question asking for "what could be improved," resulted in recommendations including lengthening the overall program from a semester to a year, enhancing communications between students and faculty mentors, and changing the timing of the multi-day field trip. The program implemented a second cohort in the 2011–2012 academic year with 10 students, allowing for more opportunities to interact with public service and outreach units, faculty, and community partners; the fall semester's focus is on getting to know the breadth of the units, their missions, and their faculty through weekly meetings and excursions, with the spring semester devoted to the unit-specific internships. Other modifications were also "member checked" with the pilot program students and included a program-beginning retreat, and conversion of the internship to an unpaid experience while adding an optional, paid full-time summer internship. This second cohort also took part in the program evaluation process.

Conclusion

As the Kellogg Commission (2001, *p. 14*) pointed out, "[s]tudents are one of the principal engagement resources available to every university." Indeed, engaged public institutions are challenged not only to "put [their] critical resources (knowledge and expertise) to work on the problems" of their communities, but also to find ways to involve students in this process (*p. 14*). Unlike a university's teaching and research missions, its service and outreach mission may be opaque to undergraduate students, who may conflate this mission with voluntary community service or be altogether unaware of the university's role in engagement with critical statewide issues beyond the classroom or lab bench. However, a thoughtfully designed program—one that both exposes students to the breadth of the university's public service work and engages them deeply through contextualized, mentored field experiences—can indeed develop student awareness of the importance of this aspect of the academy. Such a program holds promise for creating a core of informed student advocates for the university's public service and outreach mission and engagement work as well as improving these students' own competencies and motivations for incorporating public service and outreach into their academic and professional careers.

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About the Author

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8. Much of what I do is for a cause bigger than myself.
9. I seldom think about the welfare of people whom I don't know personally.
10. Politics is a dirty word.
11. Serving citizens would give me a good feeling even if no one paid me for it.
12. I am often reminded by daily events about how dependent we are on one another.
13. It is hard to get me genuinely interested in what is going on in my community.
14. I feel people should give back to society more than they get from it.
15. I am one of those rare people who would risk personal loss to help someone else.
16. I unselfishly contribute to my community.
17. I have little compassion for people in need who are unwilling to take the first step to help themselves.
18. I am prepared to make enormous sacrifices for the good of society.
19. The give and take of public policy making doesn't appeal to me.
20. Meaningful public service is very important to me.
21. I don't care much for politicians.
22. I would prefer seeing public officials do what is best for the whole community even if it harmed my interests.
23. I consider public service my civic duty.
24. There are few public programs that I wholeheartedly support.

Demographics

Please provide the following information:

Name:

Email:

Major(s):

Minor(s):

Expected graduation semester:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Semester of participation in PSO Student Scholars Program:

PSO Unit you are working with:

What do you hope to learn through participating in this program?

University-Specific Outcomes

Please rate on the following scale:

- | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Strongly disagree | Disagree somewhat | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree somewhat | Strongly agree |
1. I am able to describe how public service and outreach (PSO) relates to the university's mission.
 2. I am able to describe UGA's land- and sea-grant mission.
 3. I am able to define how service-learning is different from community service.
 4. I am able to describe specific initiatives or activities for all eight UGA Public Service & Outreach units.
 5. I can explain specific ways that UGA's PSO units support community and economic development.

6. I can explain specific ways that UGA's PSO units engage with environmental and natural-resource issues.
7. I can explain specific ways that UGA's PSO units promote and provide education and training.
8. I can explain specific ways that UGA's PSO units identify community needs.
9. I can explain specific ways that UGA's PSO units address issues relating to Georgia's changing demographics.
10. I can explain specific ways that UGA's PSO units address issues of health and wellbeing of individuals and communities.
11. I am able to describe ways that public service and outreach relates to my career interests.
12. I can describe how to find academic service-learning opportunities at UGA.

Post-Participation Student Survey

(In addition to the items from the pre-participation survey)

Please provide the following information:

Name:

Email:

Semester of participation in PSO Student Scholars Program:

PSO Unit you are working with:

Hours of PSO Internship you (will) have completed by the end of this semester:

How would you summarize the activities you did through this internship?

What are the top three things you learned from taking part in this program?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

In what way(s) do you anticipate that public service will be part of your future?

How satisfied are you with the following aspects of the Public Service & Outreach Student Scholars Program?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Very dissatisfied | Somewhat dissatisfied | Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied | Somewhat satisfied | Very satisfied |

1. The program as a whole.
2. The program's impact on my understanding of public service and outreach.
3. The supervision and mentoring received during my internship.
4. The work activities undertaken through my internship.
5. The cohort-group meetings.
6. The local off-campus visits.
7. The Marine Extension trip.
8. The service-learning project.
9. The final project I undertook.
10. The timing of the program activities.
11. Opportunities to network with other students.

What could be improved about the program for future semesters?

