

Student Philanthropy in Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

Student philanthropy is a relatively new teaching strategy that provides students with the opportunity to learn about and invest in nonprofit organizations. This study identifies student philanthropy programs and courses at more than 40 colleges and universities in the United States. Then it collects and cumulates data on a dozen student philanthropy efforts regarding their development, implementation, evaluation and plans for the future.

Introduction

Student philanthropy has been defined as “an experiential learning approach that provides students with the opportunity to study social problems and nonprofit organizations, and then make decisions about investing funds in them” (Olberding, 2009). This article identifies student philanthropy programs and courses at colleges and universities in the United States; collects information on their development, implementation, evaluation and plans for the future; and summarizes and analyzes these data.

Literature Review

Goals of student philanthropy. Olberding (2009) reviewed the literature on student philanthropy and on-line descriptions of student philanthropy programs. She identified the following reasons that colleges and universities create these programs:

- enhance students’ awareness of social problems and nonprofits in the community;
- influence their attitudes, interests, intentions and behaviors related to civic engagement and social responsibility;
- increase their knowledge of philanthropic processes, particularly grant seeking and grant making;
- enhance their understanding of the academic content of the course by integrating theory and practice; and
- improve their critical thinking, communication, leadership, and other work-life skills.

Models of student philanthropy. Olberding (2009) identified two models of student philanthropy. One approach provides a class or club with funds, and then students research community problems and nonprofits, conduct a request for proposal (RFP) process, and decide which proposals to fund (e.g., Ahmed & Olberding, 2007/2008; Irvin, 2005). This model has been called “direct giving” since students have the responsibility of making decisions that directly impact the funding of nonprofits (Olberding, 2009; “The Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project,” 2007). At Northern Kentucky University (NKU), more than 2,000 students have participated in the direct giving model of student philanthropy in at least 40 different courses (“The Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project,” 2007). These classes have invested about \$420,000 in more than 200 local nonprofits (Olberding, 2009). Another early initiative was by Professor Rene Irvin at the University of Oregon. One of the first professors to use student philanthropy, Irvin (2005) incorporated it into a freshman seminar on the nonprofit sector and a graduate seminar on philanthropy. Within the past couple of years, a number of universities have created student philanthropy programs or courses, often modeled after these ground-breaking programs. For example, Collin County Community College based its program on the one at NKU

(Smith & Brooks, 2009). In addition to direct giving, there is at least one other model of student philanthropy that has emerged in the past two years or so. The "indirect giving" model partners a class with a corporation or foundation in the "real world" (Olberding, 2009). The students evaluate grant proposals submitted by nonprofits to the corporation or foundation and make recommendations about which proposals to fund; the corporation or foundation makes the final funding decisions. In Spring 2007, NKU developed an indirect giving model of student philanthropy while maintaining the original direct giving model; it may be the only university with a formalized indirect giving program (Olberding, 2009).

Outcomes of student philanthropy. There is some empirical evidence that student philanthropy programs have made progress toward their goals. Ahmed and Olberding (2007/2008) analyzed data from about 1,000 students who participated in the direct giving model of student philanthropy at NKU from 2000 to 2005. They found that the program impacted a majority of participating students, including making them more aware of social problems (89.6 percent) and nonprofit organizations (94.9 percent), increasing their sense of responsibility to help others in need (88.6 percent), and enhancing their intentions to give money to charity (83.7 percent) and do volunteer work (82.6 percent). Olberding (2009) examined the impacts of NKU's indirect giving model of student philanthropy not only on participants' awareness, interest and intentions but also their learning. A key finding was that a majority of participating students indicated the program helped them learn the curriculum (75.7 percent), apply the course principles (75.7 percent), and gain academic skills or knowledge (62.1 percent).

Research Design

For this study, one strategy to identify student philanthropy programs and courses was searches on service-learning websites. These websites included Campus Compact – a national coalition of more than 1,000 college and university presidents dedicated to promoting service learning and civic engagement – and Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse – which supports service learning in higher education as well as primary and secondary education. Another strategy was to use Google and Google Scholar to find articles in which student philanthropy was highlighted. These strategies resulted in the identification of student philanthropy programs or courses at the following 43 colleges or universities in the United States:

Arizona State University
Binghamton University
Boston University
California State University at Fresno
Chatfield College
Colgate University
Cornell University
Davidson College
Defiance College
DePaul University
George Washington University
Grand Valley State University
Grove City College
Indiana University
Laney College
Lesley University
Loyola University
Mercy College of Northwest Ohio
Mount Union College
Mount Saint Joseph College
Northeastern University
Northern Kentucky University

Northwest Missouri State University
Notre Dame de Namur University
Otterbein University
Portland Community College
Providence College
Stanford University
Thomas More College
University of Cincinnati
University of Kentucky
University of Mary Washington
University of North Carolina at Charlotte
University of Pennsylvania
University of Pittsburgh
University of Virginia
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
University of Nebraska Omaha
University of Oregon
Western Michigan University
Whitworth University
Wilmington College
Xavier University

Once the institutions were identified, a search was conducted to identify individual names and contact information for each student philanthropy effort. This proved to be much more difficult than expected. These individuals were sent an email message inviting them to complete the survey on SurveyMonkey.com and then sent two email reminders. In the end, individuals from 12 colleges and universities responded to the survey. The data from the survey are both quantitative and qualitative. Most of the questions were close-ended questions that asked participants to make a selection or selections from a list of responses. These data are cumulated primarily by the percentage of responses to each choice. In addition, there were a few open-ended questions that asked respondents to write narrative responses. The qualitative data are included when they seem to help explain the quantitative results.

Results

Development of student philanthropy programs or courses. The survey provided some confirmation that one of the first – if not the first – philanthropy program was implemented in 2000 (at NKU). The next year in which a respondent implement a student philanthropy program or course was four years later – in 2004. The majority of respondents (58.3 percent) indicated that their programs started up only within the past couple of years – in 2007 or 2008. An item on the survey asked respondents to mark the sources that they used in developing their student philanthropy program. More than 90 percent of respondents indicated that sought information and ideas from one or more conferences. Also, 75 percent of respondents indicated that they made direct contact with colleges, universities and other organizations that had experience with this pedagogy, particularly NKU and Campus Compact. Another item asked respondents about the types of information or materials that they requested from these external organizations when they were developing their programs. They requested the following types of information:

- Sample syllabi – 100 percent of colleges and universities that responded to this item;
- Course or program overviews, such as structure and guidelines – 90 percent of responding institutions;
- Examples of RFPs distributed to nonprofits – 70 percent of respondents;
- Sample letters to nonprofits, including award letters and rejection letters – 60 percent of respondents;
- Evaluation tools – 60 percent of respondents; and
- Funding sources – 30 percent.*

Implementation of student philanthropy programs. Student philanthropy is being implemented to different degrees and in different ways at U.S. colleges and universities. The following statistics represent some of this variation:

- Only one professor incorporating student philanthropy into one course – 58.3 percent of colleges or universities that responded to this item;
- More than one professor incorporating student philanthropy into their courses independently – 16.7 percent of responding institutions; and
- A student philanthropy program that raises funds, trains faculty, etc. – 25 percent of respondents.

Survey results indicated that colleges and universities have incorporated student philanthropy into a variety of disciplines. These disciplines include:

- Public Administration – 62.5 percent of colleges or universities that responded to this item;
- Business and Communication – 50 percent of responding institutions (for each of these two disciplines);
- Social Work – 37.5 percent of responding institutions;
- English, Sociology and Leadership – 25 percent of respondents (for each of these three disciplines); and

- Art, Criminal Justice, Economics, Education, Philosophy and Theater – 12.5 percent (for each of these six disciplines).*

The total amount of funds for student philanthropy at each institution ranged from a low of \$4,000 to a high of \$24,000 with an average of \$10,875. The survey asked respondents to indicate the sources of funds for their student philanthropy efforts, and they identified the following:

- Foundations – 63.6 percent of colleges or universities that responded to this item;
- The college or university – 45.5 percent of responding institutions;
- Students raising money through special events, etc. – 36.4 percent of respondents;
- Corporations – 27.3 percent of respondents; and
- Alumni of the college or university – 18.2 percent.*

Some colleges and universities have incorporated student philanthropy in only one class per year while others have done it in up to 12 classes per year. Most institutions with more than one class allotted a certain amount – usually \$3,000 or \$4,000 per class. At most institutions, each class works independently. But at one university, classes have collaborated on student philanthropy over multiple academic terms. Two classes in the fall raised \$10,000 for the program, and then one class in the spring distributed the funds to local nonprofits.

Evaluation of student philanthropy programs. Individual faculty conducted their own end-of-semester evaluations of the student philanthropy component in their classes at most colleges and universities responding to the survey (75 percent). A key reason is that most college colleges or universities have only one faculty teaching one course with a student philanthropy component (about 60 percent). At other institutions, evaluation was centralized through a center, department or office (16.7 percent) and/or done by an external organization, such as Campus Compact (also 16.7 percent).

In their evaluations of student philanthropy courses and programs, colleges and universities gathered information from various sources. Respondents indicated that they sought feedback from the following participants in the student philanthropy experience:

- Students who participated in a philanthropy course – 100 percent of colleges or universities that responded to this item;
- Representatives of nonprofits who applied for funds – 50 percent of responding institutions;
- Faculty who used student philanthropy – 33.3 percent of respondents; and
- Funders of the student philanthropy course or program – 8.3 percent.*

Clearly, the most prevalent source of information for evaluative purposes is students. Institutions looked at various impacts that the philanthropy experience had on students, including the following:

- Learning of the course content – 90.9 percent of colleges and universities that responded to this item;
- Awareness of social problems and nonprofits – 72.7 percent of responding institutions;
- Intended behaviors, such as intentions to volunteer and donate money to charity – 54.5 percent of respondents; and
- Beliefs and values, such as a responsibility to help others in need and interest in public service – 45.4 percent.*

Plans for the future of student philanthropy. About 60 percent of respondents indicated that their college or university has plans to expand student philanthropy. In response to an open-ended item, respondents described their plans, and here are a couple of them:

- “We would like to expand the program to include 4-6 courses per year and include a wider variety of disciplines, including engineering, architecture, health care fields, and the arts. All three courses this year were in the social sciences.”

- “This spring we added an Introduction to Nonprofits and Philanthropy course. This course is currently only offered once a year at one of our campuses, but we hope to expand the program to rotate to our two other campuses.”

Although there is interest in expanding student philanthropy efforts, a number of respondents noted that are challenges in doing it, particularly related to raising the requisite funds. For example, one institution received funding for its student philanthropy program from a private philanthropist based on a four-year contract. Once the contract ended, the institution was not able to secure additional funding and had to cease the program. Several respondents reported that they would like “to grow their fundraising capacity” or obtain additional funding sources. In addition to expanding existing efforts, survey results indicate that there will likely be an increase in the number of new student philanthropy programs at colleges and universities. A majority of survey respondents (58.3 percent) said they have been contacted by representatives of other institutions of higher education that are interested in developing a student philanthropy program or course.

Most respondents (80 percent) said that they are interested in a national clearinghouse or center on student philanthropy. The types of information that they would like to access from a clearinghouse or center include the following:

- Course or program overviews, such as structure and guidelines – 90 percent of colleges and universities that responded to this item;
- Sample syllabi – 90 percent of responding institutions;
- Evaluation tools – 90 percent of responding institutions;
- Best practices – 90 percent of respondents;
- Examples of RFPs distributed to nonprofits – 70 percent of respondents;
- Funding sources – 70 percent; and
- Sample letters to nonprofits, including award letters and rejection letters – 60 percent.*

Discussion and Conclusion

Student philanthropy is a new pedagogy that seems to be gaining popularity among colleges and universities in the United States. This study identified more than 40 student philanthropy programs or courses that currently exist at higher education institutions.

A survey of 12 colleges and universities with student philanthropy programs or courses found that most of them had been developed within the past year or two, suggesting a recent increase. Further, about 60 percent of respondents said they have plans to expand their current efforts. Also, about 60 percent said they have been contacted by other colleges and universities interested in starting a new student philanthropy program or course. In addition, it seems that student philanthropy is diffusing from a core set of disciplines to other disciplines in the future. To date, Public Administration has been the most popular discipline for student philanthropy, according to survey results. This may be because a number of Public Administration programs have nonprofit management as a course or courses and sometimes as an area of concentration, and nonprofit management courses focus on philanthropy, grant making, grant writing, etc. Colleges and universities also have tried student philanthropy in Business, Communication, Social Work, Sociology, English, Leadership and other disciplines.

Based on the survey results, there seems to be strong support for a national clearinghouse on student philanthropy. In particular, respondents expressed interest in sample documents, funding sources, evaluation tools and best practices. Interestingly, only 30 percent of respondents said that they sought information on funding sources during the development of their student philanthropy course or program; however, 70 percent of respondents – more than two times as many – indicated that now they would

like a national clearinghouse to have information about funding sources. The reason may be that these institutions received "seed money" to start their student philanthropy programs and are now in search of more sustainable funding.

Student philanthropy is an area that seems ripe for research. Because it is a new pedagogy, there have been only a limited number of scholarly articles to date. Certainly, one possibility for future research is to continue collecting and analyzing data on student philanthropy efforts to learn even more about their development, implementation, evaluation and plans for the future. Another avenue of research is to continue measuring outcomes and impacts of student philanthropy not only from the perspective of the participating students but also from the perspectives of faculty members, nonprofit organizations and even funders.

Notes

* Respondents were asked to select all responses that applied, so they could select more than one response. Therefore, the total percentage can be more than 100 percent.

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