Fostering Global Leadership Development Through Service-Learning

Diana L. Marvel

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Abstract
This paper discusses the potential of service-learning as a proven high-impact educational practices that can effectively prepare students to face the inevitable challenges of an increasingly globalized economy. Global service-learning programs can be active sites of global leadership development in which students learn to think critically and act responsibly while gaining a greater understanding for the complex web of interdependent relationships involved in decision-making and social mobilization. Although it has gained in popularity, however, service-learning remains an add-on curricular feature that professors may or may not choose to integrate into their courses. Furthermore, despite a national push to encourage education abroad, international study still remains inaccessible to many students who do not possess adequate resources to finance international travel. The author argues that service-learning should be more widely and intentionally integrated into the undergraduate curriculum as a means to foster the development of global leadership skills.

Keywords: service-learning, leadership, global skills, study abroad
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Introduction

Students emerging from the higher education system in the United States need to be prepared to function effectively in a global society. Today’s graduates are faced with a globalized economy, multicultural and transnational work environments and the demands of a complex and dynamic world. Whether students seek to construct their lives and careers in provincial or cosmopolitan communities, they will likely need to draw upon effective global leadership skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving skills, intercultural acumen and ethical responsibility to be successful (Wurr & Hamilton, 2012). As Kuh (2008) suggests in his landmark report of high-impact educational practices, institutions of higher education hold a responsibility to students to provide them with opportunities to develop the skills necessary to succeed in the world they are inheriting:

We live in a demanding, increasingly competitive global environment.

The quality of citizens’ learning has become our most important societal resource.

If students leave college without the preparation they need for this complex and volatile world, the long-term cost to them—and to our society—will be cumulative and ultimately devastating (p. 8).

From this perspective, it is the mission of universities and the role of higher education to produce responsible citizens capable of contributing constructively to the dynamic and complex world of which they are a part (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich & Stephens, 2003). If higher education is to be tasked with such an enormous responsibility as safeguarding the future of our society, it is important to identify the practices that foster the development of this much needed skill set and mindset. In his report, Kuh (2008) identifies Diversity/Global Learning and Service-Learning
and Community-Based Learning as high-impact educational practices that increase student retention and engagement while preparing students with the intellectual tools and ethical foundation they need to address the rigors of 21st century life. He describes Diversity/Global Learning courses and programs as those that “help students explore cultures, life experiences, and world views different from their own” and Service-Learning and Community-based learning as courses that “make giving back to the community an explicit outcome of college and good preparation for citizenship, work and life” (Kuh, 2008, p. 11). It is these high-impact educational practices that will effectively prepare students to face the inevitable challenges of an increasingly globalized economy and the responsibility of today’s colleges and universities to provide access to meaningful opportunities for developing these skills.

**Preparing Graduates to Meet the Challenges Presented by a Globalized Economy**

In addition to possessing a college degree and the knowledge it represents, social scientist John H. Scanzoni suggests that graduates in the information age will need human capital skills, namely higher-order thinking, to be competitive in the job market (Scanzoni, 2005). Unfortunately, evidence suggests that students are not graduating with the requisite high-level analytical skills to meet these challenges (Green, 2013). Results from the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) surveys indicate that of the more than 300 employers interviewed, 63% believe college graduates did not possess the desired skills for functioning in a global economy and achieving promotion (Kuh, 2008). College is an important site of leadership development that will have a lasting impact on students’ professional and civic lives. In their study of leadership development in service-learning, Wurr and Hamilton discuss numerous research findings that suggest that involvement in leadership activities during the college years
has positive effects on students: “It enhances conflict resolution and commitment to civic responsibility, inspires a greater sense of efficacy in shaping the world around them, and enables active learning through collaboration and improved social adjustment (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Tomlinson-Clarke & Clarke, 1994 in Wurr & Hamilton, 2012, p. 215). The results of Wurr & Hamilton’s (2012) research also demonstrate that students need support, resources and opportunities to successfully integrate their academic work, personal values and sense of civic responsibility into a coherent, actionable process to adequately prepare for future leadership roles.

College students need to be prepared for the global nature of the job market and the myriad changing contexts of globalized society. Addressing this need, however, seems akin to hitting a moving target—how do universities prepare students to enter the workforce in contexts that are increasingly and rapidly changing? Furthermore, is preparing students for the job market a sufficient goal for universities? Citing the university as an “institution of public service,” Scanzoni (2005) argues for the university’s role in developing responsible citizens that contribute to society as a whole:

The twenty-first century cannot be solely about the economic well-being of the growing numbers of persons attending college and becoming credentialed. Those degree-holders must also develop a sense that they are indeed obliged to contribute to their society and to the citizens that surround them. Society in the new century shall no longer be able to afford the luxury of college graduates lacking a keen feeling for the public household (p. 12).

In order to meet these challenges and to fulfill their civic mission, universities can support students in their development of global leadership skills by actively supporting and
integrating high-impact educational practices such as global learning and service-learning into the undergraduate curriculum. It is uncommon for faculty or university leadership to rally against such practices—quite the contrary. Speaking to the merits of service-learning and its sustained popularity, Butin (2010) describes service-learning as a “fashionable and coveted marker in higher education that draws prospective students, inspires donors, fosters exciting pedagogical opportunities, and positions institutions for federal grant dollars” (p. xv). Despite its appeal, it remains a challenge to consistently make visible the impact of service-learning on students and communities and to make such programs an integral part of undergraduate education and when done well—a necessary component to developing college graduates into responsible global citizens.

Global Leadership Skills

Although global leadership skills have been identified as a desired outcome of the college experience and an integral component of students’ preparation for the job market and role in civil society, it is not always clear what is actually meant by “global leadership.” This is in part because global leadership is still considered an emerging field and no widely accepted definition currently exits (Pless, Maak & Stahl, 2011; Osland, 2008). It is also important to recognize that the term “global leadership” can be conceived of primarily as a set of characteristics that relate specifically to the discipline of business management and corporate leadership. From their review of the literature, Pless, Maak and Stahl (2011) suggest the following characteristics of global leadership that differentiate it from strictly domestic leadership:

A setting with wider ranging diversity; wider and more frequent boundary spanning both within and across organizational and national boundaries; greater
need for broad knowledge that spans functions and nations; more stakeholders to understand and consider when making decisions; a more challenging and expanded list of competing tensions both on and off the job; heightened ambiguity surrounding decisions and related outcomes/effects; more challenging ethical dilemmas relating to globalization. (p. 239).

While relating specifically to global business leaders, these characteristics speak to the complexity, scope and context of global leadership as an emerging discipline and the skills required of those assuming leadership positions in a globalized economy. For the purposes of this discussion, however, global leadership is conceptualized more broadly within the context of global learning and part of a liberal arts education.

In both cases, the term belies easy definition despite its popularity of use in mission statements, program goals and learning objectives. In the university setting, often global learning outcomes like global leadership are determined by a broad spectrum of faculty and staff who consider global issues related to their disciplines, what constitutes global learning, and how it aligns with related academic goals (Green, 2013). Consequently, the term “global leadership” can be discipline-specific, program-specific and university-specific. However, there seems to be some consensus in the literature that critical-thinking skills are a desired outcome of a college education (Kuh, 2008; Scanzoni, 2005;) and a component of global leadership (Green, 2013; Jenkins, 2012; Wurr & Hamilton, 2012). Critical thinking skills alone are not exclusively characteristic of global leadership, but rather an ability to think critically, adapt, and act decisively in multiple contexts could be considered a global dimension to leadership development (Jenkins, 2012).
It is important to be mindful that global competence is not simply an accumulation of experiences abroad or a collection of do’s and don’ts for different countries, but rather a mindset and orientation toward the world that can and should be developed domestically as well as internationally through various pedagogical methods. But it remains a challenge for institutions to identify and assess global competencies because global learning outcomes are difficult to articulate and measure (Olsen, Green & Hill, 2006). The increased attention given to the need for global learning objectives as well as the proliferation of global studies programs has inspired many colleges and universities to generate their own definitions and sets of objectives. The American Council on Education, with support from the Ford Foundation, has developed a handbook for institutions to use when setting standards for global learning as well as providing a definition through their “Global Learning For All” initiative. The American Council on Education defines global learning as “the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students acquire through a variety of experiences that enable them to understand world cultures and events; analyze global systems; appreciate cultural differences; and apply this knowledge and appreciation to their lives as citizens and workers” (Longo & Saltmarsh, 2011). Consequently, global leadership development as a college outcome can be conceived of as a “global” orientation to the world that is comprised of higher-order thinking skills and the ability to adapt and respond effectively to new and potentially disorienting situations.

Service-Learning and Leadership Development

Service-learning has many definitions but is generally understood as an experiential-learning pedagogy that links academic work and community engagement through critical reflection. It continues to gain popularity in higher education due to its potential to provide transformational learning opportunities for students and to contribute to community-building and
development (Butin, 2010; Colby, Bercaw, Clark & Gialiardi, 2009). Service-learning programs can be facilitated in domestic and international contexts and be adapted to meet the curricular needs of varied academic programs and disciplines. Service-learning practitioners employ an experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984) that combines active, engaged work with thoughtful reflection and discussion (Dewey, 1933)—with a curricular focus. Reflection is considered to be the essential pedagogical practice that connects the service experience with academic study and promotes the cognitive development that equips students to grapple with ill-structured social problems (Eyler, 2002). Service-learning, in its ideal form, provides opportunities for mutual benefit and reciprocity: “Service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring” (Furco, 1996, p. 5). It is service-learning’s framework that integrates mutual benefit, community-engaged learning and real-world context that can make it an effective modality for developing responsible, socially-conscious student leaders. Naturally, not all service-learning programs achieve these outcomes but they can be designed carefully and intentionally so that service-learning remains a relevant and effective means for fostering leadership skills that address the gaps in student preparedness for employment and global citizenship.

Experiential learning practices like service-learning create space for student leadership development because they provide a living-laboratory for students to engage in critical thinking, to grapple with complex social issues, and to gain real-world experience. Wurr and Hamilton (2012) suggest that service-learning as a pedagogy effectively supports the development of leadership skills because it provides opportunities and encourages students to become co-
producers of knowledge. By taking students out of the classroom and into the community, students translate theory to practice, generating real-world experiences they can draw from to better integrate academic learning.

Research demonstrates that service-learning can also contribute to participants’ capacity to lead ethically and empathetically. In her study of the impact of service-learning on leadership attributes, Calvert (2012) found a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and ethical leadership. Her research further indicated that students who participated in service-learning reported a heightened awareness of ethical issues and of self-awareness than those students who did not participate in service-learning programs. Chambers and Lavery (2012) found in their study of the experiences of pre-service teachers involved in service-learning units as part of their undergraduate Teacher Education curriculum that, in addition to honing leadership skills, students strengthened their abilities to empathize, to be resilient and to show initiative. Not only does service-learning have a positive impact on undergraduate leadership development but Dion, Hickey, Moloney & Siccama, (2004, p. 5) found that service learning is also an effective strategy for leadership skill development in graduate students: “The lessons that these students gained could not have been taught in the classroom or gleaned from a text; they had to be experienced.” The demands on college graduates to function effectively and in a socially responsible manner in multicultural and multinational environments will only increase and their ability to respond ethically and empathetically in challenging situations is a critical life skill, as well as a characteristic of effective leadership.

Service-learning also provides students with opportunities to experience seeking solutions to complex problems—and to navigate the experience of finding no solution at all. This process is practical preparation for meeting the demands of real-world problems and
requires high-order thinking that supports students’ cognitive development. In her discussion on
the importance of reflection in service-learning, Eyler (2002) explains that whilst engaging in
community service-learning, students encounter their own assumptions about the nature of social
problems, “helping” paradigms and complex community issues. Reflection then becomes the
mechanism by which students “develop the capacity to understand and resolve complexity” and
to develop critical thinking skills (Eyler, 2002, p. 522). If well designed and executed, service-
learning experiences can be highly transformative for students and can support their development
into engaged citizens and leaders of social change (American College Personnel Association,
2014).

Service-learning is also an effective pedagogy for leadership development because it
offers opportunities for personally relevant, identity-defining experiences (Butin, 2010, Calvert,
2012). Bennis and Thomas (2002) describe these transformational experiences as “crucible
moments” in which an individual undergoes a deeply-rooted shift in self-awareness or identity:

For the leaders we interviewed, the crucible experience was a trial and a
test, a point of deep self-reflection that forced them to question who they were
and what mattered to them. It required them to examine their values, question
their assumptions, hone their judgment. And invariably, they emerged from the
crucible stronger and more sure of themselves and their purpose—changed in
some fundamental way (p. 40).

Service-learning can provide the context for such crucible moments in which students forge new
conceptions of the world and their understanding of their role in it. Service-learning provides a
framework for students to experience such defining moments in an environment that provides
access to support from faculty, peers and community partners. The cycle of action and reflection
embedded in service-learning creates consistent and continued opportunities for students to think critically about social issues and incorporate new modes of thinking and behaving based on a revised conception of reality. Butin (2010) suggests that “service-learning is existentially defining because it forces individuals (students, faculty and community partners) to take a stance. In doing so, individuals must (consciously or not) define themselves by the decisions they make or refuse to make” (p. 18). In this statement, Butin (2010) is also drawing attention to the fact that it is not only students who are affected by the service-learning experience but rather all of the stakeholders engaged in the service relationships and work. I would argue that the context for these defining moments is all the more relevant to leadership development when the service-learning curriculum has intentional, social justice learning outcomes. Developing leaders with a sensitivity and commitment to social justice and community well-being seems an ethical and sustainably-minded goal for U.S. higher education and a worthwhile identity-shaping experience.

Service-learning is also a modality for supporting higher education’s public service mission and goals for producing active, responsible citizens. Service-learning can support and maintain community-university partnerships that contribute to community-building and the socio-economic development of a region. Conversely, poorly conceived service-learning projects can also damage campus-community relations, reinforce town-gown dichotomies and undermine the potential for stakeholder development and benefit. Well-designed, equitable community-engaged learning can, however, help communities build social capital which, in turn, can strengthen community cohesion (Calvert, Emery, Kinsey, Henness, Ball, & Moncheski, 2013). Not only does service-learning present the potential for a positive impact on student development and learning outcomes and the development of community capital, but Wurr and Hamilton
(2012) indicate that a commitment to community engagement over the span of one’s lifetime is more likely to present itself when students have the opportunities to engage civically and experience the outcomes during the college years.

The potential outcomes of service-learning on student development are many and varied. Engaging in service-learning can help students translate their experiences of community service into cross-cultural and global understandings that will foster an ethic of leadership and citizenship in what students come to recognize as a larger, more complex world (Butin, 2010; Colby et al., 2003; Colby et al., 2009; Eyler and Giles, 1999). Service-learning as a pedagogy can effectively contribute to the development of socially-responsible leaders due to its emphasis on mutually beneficial relationships; community-engaged learning; experience of complex social issues and potential for defining moments. An increased ability for higher-order thinking and an enhanced sense of one’s relationship to local and global communities are potential student outcomes of well-conceived service-learning programs. However, it is important to be mindful that service-learning is dynamic and to a certain extent, unpredictable, much like the “real life” students encounter outside the walls of their academic institutions, and the context in which service-learning occurs greatly influences the outcomes on all stakeholder experiences.

**Study Abroad and International Service-Learning**

For some students, experiencing “real life” means participating in some form of international study. Increasing numbers of students are studying abroad and preliminary research shows that even after a program of short-duration, students report significant gains related to global engagement and global values (Bringle & Hatcher, 2011). Additionally, attitudinal, dispositional and developmental outcomes like global-mindedness and cultural relativism are considered core values for education abroad programming (Rubin & Matthews,
2013) as can be target language acquisition. Global leadership development, as an intended outcome of service-learning, is often integrated into learning objectives of study abroad programs. Not all education abroad programs incorporate a service component but Mlyn and McBride (2013) have noted that as campus internationalization and civic engagement have gained momentum on campuses nationwide, study abroad programs with service activities as part of the curriculum represent a growing trend in education abroad. Nolting, Donohue, Matherly and Tillman (2013) also observe that there appears to be “a broad consensus developing in education abroad that, in order for experiential learning to be maximized, it must be guided, intentional, and reflective before, during, and after the experience abroad” (p. 4).

Service-learning pedagogy, with its emphasis on experiential learning through action and reflection, addresses this recommendation for optimal student learning. International service-learning is a growing field in education abroad and is defined as:

> A structured academic experience in another country in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that addresses identified community needs, (b) learn from direct interaction and cross cultural dialogue with others; and (c) reflect on the experience in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a deeper understanding of global and intercultural issues, a broader appreciation of the host country and the discipline, and an enhanced sense of their own responsibilities as citizens, locally and globally (Bringle and Hatcher, 2011, p. 19).

The objectives of international service-learning explicitly address institutional goals in higher education that declare an intention to prepare students for employment and engaged citizenship in a globalized society. Moreover, they respond to Kuh's (2008) recommendations
for high-impact educational practices and course content related to Diversity/Global Learning and Community-Based Learning that help prepare students for future citizenship, work and life. While an international service-learning experience provides students with the opportunity to be immersed in international communities and to engage with international partner institutions, and community members, traveling abroad is not the only option available, nor should it perhaps be the most sought-after, to reap the full benefits of service-learning pedagogy and international education. A recent shift in the dichotomy of domestic vs. international service-learning has brought about a reconceptualization of service-learning programs as “global.”

**Global Service-Learning**

Global service-learning seeks to connect local and international contexts, emphasizing the interconnectedness of communities and practices (Garcia and Longo, 2013). The framework introduced by global service-learning is relevant to how the service experience is perceived by stakeholders and how the outcomes are constructed—regardless of where the service is located (Longo & Saltmarsh, 2011). Using this model, the site of the service project can be domestic or international but the objective remains the same: fostering a sense of global citizenship that connects local practices to wider community impact and global trends to local communities. In the study conducted by Pless, Maak and Stahl (2011) the emphasis in developing responsible global leaders is placed on service-learning in “foreign countries.” However, a re-visioning of service-learning as “global” demonstrates how global perspectives can be incorporated into the service-learning curriculum and the connections between and across communities can be forged psychologically and tangibly without the express need for international travel. In designing global service-learning programs, Longo and Saltmarsh (2011) urge educators to establish relationships with community partners that are “reciprocal, nonexploitative, democratic, and
“responsible,” a kind of relationship dynamic that is decidedly different from study abroad students and international communities (p. 15). I would also contend that framing service-learning as global may actually contribute more to students’ global leadership development than other service-learning frameworks as it helps students see how they are a part of an expansive, interdependent community that spans counties, countries and continents. In a world increasingly connected through media, the globalization of markets and the permeability of national borders, college graduates will need to overcome their deficits in understanding the role of the U.S. on the global stage and how to interact with cultures other than their own—both domestically and internationally. Global service-learning programs can be active sites of global leadership development in which students learn to think critically and act responsibly while gaining a greater understanding for the complex web of interdependent relationships involved in decision-making and social mobilization.

Despite a national push to encourage education abroad, international study still remains inaccessible to many students who do not possess adequate resources to finance international travel. Global service-learning, if enacted locally will impose less of a financial burden to students while still giving them access to experiential learning, address global learning objectives and contribute to local community-building. For programs that do include international service, attention can be drawn in the curriculum to issues that both local and international communities face such as poverty, food security, community revitalization, land tenure, etc., and thoughtful questions posed regarding stakeholders’ relationships to these issues. Emphasizing students’ connections to the local community before, during and after international service can help make otherwise visible domestic social issues and address the frustration caused by students’ inability to “make a difference” abroad by providing meaningful opportunities for students to invest in
locally. Global service-learning is also an effective means of addressing institutional concerns that local and regional social problems are being neglected by service-learning practitioners who take students (and resources) to needy communities around the globe to the detriment of local communities.

**Conclusion**

Upon entering college, students enter into a kind of covenant with their educational institution. Students invest time, money and resources with the understanding that the institution will provide meaningful opportunities for them to develop the skills and capacities necessary to become knowledge-producers, high-functioning citizens, and contributing members of a global society. However, colleges can be doing more to prepare students for the demands of 21st century life. While many educational institutions have adapted their undergraduate curriculum to include global learning objectives, graduates are still lacking the necessary analytical skills and global understanding to be effective leaders in a globalized society. Students need to know more about themselves as culturally-embedded individuals and how that impacts their interactions in domestic and international contexts.

Research demonstrates that service-learning is a high-impact educational practice that supports college student success and the development of global leadership skills. Although it has gained in popularity, service-learning remains an add-on feature that professors can choose to integrate into their curricula or not (Scanzoni, 2005). Service-learning should be more widely and intentionally integrated into the undergraduate curriculum. While international service-learning offers unique opportunities for immersion in international communities, study abroad is not a prerequisite to service-learning with a distinctly global perspective. In fact, global service-learning may provide additional, and more effective opportunities for students to develop
attributes of engaged global citizens and the mindset and skill set associated with global leadership.
References


