





## From Doers to Donors: Sociology Students' Perceptions of Experiential Philanthropy

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### ABSTRACT

Service learning is a well-established part of the sociology curriculum in many American universities and colleges. Less well known is student-led philanthropy (also known as experiential philanthropy), a form of service learning that encourages students to donate money to the community partners they are serving. Underwritten by national foundations or regional Campus Compacts, student-led philanthropy (SLP) positions undergraduates as *donors* as well as *doers*. In this paper, we ask how sociology students perceive the role of donor and how it enhances or detracts from their volunteer experiences with community partners. To answer this question, we draw on qualitative and quantitative data from 24 SLP students enrolled in an Honors Social Problems course. We find that students overwhelmingly welcome the shift from doer to donor in so much as it affords them a greater perceived sense of purpose and impact, enriching their relationships with community partners. Students lament being donors, however, when they have to collectively decide which organizations “deserve” funding. The award process is especially fraught when organizations become maligned and deemed unworthy by a subset of students. We conclude with a discussion of how SLP can be integrated into the sociology classroom and how instructors might pursue this form of service learning when resources for philanthropic giving are limited.

Universities and colleges today place increasing emphasis on experiential learning, arguing that students of the twenty-first century must not only be scholarly and well prepared for the work world but also civic-minded (Stanton 2008). A common form of experiential learning is service learning, where students volunteer for an organization in the hopes of enriching their understanding of course concepts and material (Corwin 1996; Lowe and Reisch 1998). In sociology departments nationwide, service learning is becoming an increasingly popular way for students to gain “real world” experience while simultaneously putting their sociological imaginations into practice (Ollilainen 2001).

Some instructors have turned to a particular form of experiential learning that combines service learning and philanthropic giving. Often referred to as student-led philanthropy (SLP) or experiential philanthropy, this curricular innovation aims to enhance service learning by asking students to raise or donate funds to the organizations with whom they are partnered. Although the literature on student-led philanthropy is limited, we know that this approach to teaching and learning draws “on key elements of service learning . . . providing students with experiences in community settings, organized to enhance student learning as well as encourage habits of civic engagement” (Campbell 2014:220).

Our paper explores the question of how sociology students perceive philanthropic giving or student-led philanthropy (SLP), specifically how they feel about the monetary aspects of their service experience. In essence, we want to know how students understand the shift from *doer* to *donor* in the

context of service learning. To answer this question, we draw on data from an Honors Social Problems course at a public university in Ohio. Two separate sections of the course, each a year apart, received an Ohio Campus Compact Pay It Forward Grant for \$5,000. These funds allowed students to donate funds to community partners of their choosing, with the stipulation that each student must volunteer a minimum of 15 hours over the semester and that chosen organizations must in some way aim to eradicate hunger, homelessness, or improve access to healthcare for the poor.<sup>1</sup>

Using both qualitative and quantitative data collected over the two Honors Social Problems courses, we find that students generally view SLP in a positive light, and believe the monetary component promotes meaningful and impactful engagement with community partners. In short, students appreciate the opportunity to be *donors* and not just *doers*. Students do, however, express concern over the allocation of funds and fear their organization will be passed over or “short-changed,” thereby jeopardizing the very ties they have worked to cultivate over the semester. Finally, there are students who find fault with their volunteer experience, and therefore deem community partners undeserving or unworthy of funds, something that also has implications for ongoing relationships with agencies and organizations. We conclude the paper with a discussion of how instructors might use SLP in sociology courses, highlighting both the benefits and drawbacks of introducing philanthropic giving into the student-community partner relationship.

## WHAT IS PAY IT FORWARD?

Pay It Forward (PIF) is a student-led philanthropy program administered by Ohio Campus Compact (OCC), a statewide nonprofit coalition of 35 colleges and university presidents and their campuses, working to promote and develop the civic purpose of higher education (Ohio Campus Compact 2021).<sup>2</sup> Although the size of PIF grants varies, the program generally allocates between \$2,500–\$5,000 to instructors who have an active service-learning curriculum in one or more of their courses. Since 2010, PIF has engaged nearly 3,700 college students in 186 courses across 38 campuses in Ohio, Kentucky and Michigan. Students in these programs have completed approximately 67,000 total volunteer hours, investing \$674,500 in more than 478 community-based nonprofits across the three states. Campus Compact programs (at the national and state level) rely on private donors and an annual drive to fund their projects and scholarships, including the Ohio Pay It Forward program.

Once the PIF grant is allocated to a given course, instructors facilitate the service learning and grant donation processes in their classrooms. Campus Compact stipulates that students must conduct a needs assessment prior to making their final decision and that students must work collectively to decide which partner or partners receive funding and in what amounts. In our Social Problems courses, the first author (and lead instructor) asked students to complete a short questionnaire about their backgrounds, volunteer experiences, and interests during the first week and then divided the class into teams of four. Of ten possible community partners, each team ranked their first, second, and third choice of partner, after which the instructor and teaching assistant assigned each team to an organization. Students were required to volunteer 35 hours total in their respective sites (20 hours more than the PIF minimum), while also keeping weekly journals about their experiences. This work was in addition to weekly readings on topics such as systemic racism, homelessness, and poverty, and regular individual assessments on course material including exams and reflection papers.

Midway through the semester, students helped construct a request for funds using a template provided by OCC and then distributed this call to community partners. Toward the end of the semester, students were asked to conduct a written needs assessment and prepare a summary statement about their organization. In the penultimate week of class, students read through all grant

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<sup>1</sup>The first author applied for and received the Pay It Forward grant in December 2010 for use in Spring 2010 and 2011. Once received, monies were managed and donated by students enrolled in Social Problems. Pay It Forward stipulates that students individually volunteer with a community partner and then collectively decide as a class where to donate funds after conducting a needs assessment of each organization.

<sup>2</sup>Ohio is one of 34 states in the United States to affiliate with the national Campus Compact program, established in 1985.

submissions and then each team presented the needs assessment of their community partners to the rest of the class. After a group discussion facilitated by the instructor, students voted via secret ballot to determine the allocation of funding. This was a two-step vote. The first vote determined whether they believed a community partner should be funded. The second vote ranked organizations by apparent need. Each semester there was general consensus with respect to which partners to fund and which to prioritize, although, as we discuss below, this discussion was at times stressful for students. Over the two semesters, only one community partner failed to turn in a grant request and a few others were deemed “unworthy” of funding by the students (also discussed later in the paper). In total, eight organizations were awarded \$10,000 in funding over two years with individual awards ranging between \$250 to \$2,500.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Benefits of Service Learning and Student-Led Philanthropy*

It is important to consider student-led philanthropy within the broader context of service and experiential learning. The gradual shift toward experiential learning over the last 30 years is guided by assumptions about contemporary higher education’s role in preparing students to be contributing members of society. It is widely held that students require “real world” or “hands on” volunteer experience that allows them to link theory and practice, as well as opportunities working for nonprofits or other organizations that can provide job skills and social capital. Moreover, it is now seen as the direct obligation and purview of colleges and universities to instill in students a sense of civic-mindedness and community engagement (Stanton 2008). Within sociology specifically, there have been recent calls to teach social responsibility within the context of our classrooms (Hironimus-Wendt and Wallace 2009; Huisman 2010).

The literature on experiential learning in sociology—specifically that which discusses service learning—confirms that there are certainly clear benefits when students volunteer or work in community organizations. Service-learning opportunities offered in sociology and other disciplines improve student learning (Parker-Gwin and Beth Mabry 1998; West Steck et al. 2011), positively affect student retention (Kuh et al. 2008), and help foster a sense civic engagement among young adults (Myers-Lipton 1998; Parker-Gwin and Beth Mabry 1998). We also know that service learning has the potential to humanize individuals and groups in communities who might otherwise remain abstractions to students, such as the homeless, incarcerated persons, or even racial and ethnic minorities (Becker and Paul 2015; Hattery 2003; Hochschild, Farley, and Chee 2014; Marullo 1998; Mobley 2007; Nurse and Krain 2006).

Service learning is also praised as a way for instructors to better meet learning outcomes in sociology courses. Students who participate in some form of engaged learning, whether an internship or volunteer experience, benefit from improved comprehension of methods and theory (Hironimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy 1999; Hironimus-Wendt and Wallace 2009) and are also more likely to form deep understandings of key sociological concepts (Huisman 2010). Most importantly, service learning gives students and instructors an avenue to apply sociological knowledge to real world situations and problems (Brian et al. 2019; Mobley 2007).

Student-led philanthropy seems to enjoy some of the same successes as traditional service learning, although the literature on SLP is much more limited. The existing data on experiential philanthropy suggest that students who volunteer and donate while enrolled in an SLP course are significantly more aware of nonprofit organizations and social problems in their communities, have a heightened sense of responsibility to help others in need, and have enhanced intentions to donate in the future (Ahmed and Olberding 2007). Using a quasi-experimental design, McDonald and Olberding (2012) found that these effects hold, even when compared to a control group of students who were not exposed to experiential philanthropy. In terms of learning outcomes, a recent study found that SLP enhances student interest in course material, suggesting that experiential philanthropy has the potential to enrich student learning both inside and outside of the classroom (McDougale et al. 2017).

There may also be long-term benefits to SLP in the sense that experiential philanthropy can affect students' philanthropic behavior over time, not simply their intentions to engage in this behavior down the road. In her study, Olberding (2012) found that alumni who took an SLP course at some point during their undergraduate career at a public university in the Midwest were significantly more likely to give personal funds to charitable organizations and volunteer one to ten years after graduation compared with those in the general alumni population.

### ***The Pitfalls of Service Learning***

Despite the known success of service-learning and experiential curricula, problems with this method of instruction can arise. Not all service-learning courses are created equal, and success is linked to a host of factors, including how well service learning is integrated into the course curriculum, the extent of instructor engagement, and whether adequate reflective practices and assessments are built into the course (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff 1994). Scholars of teaching and learning have also noted that service-learning opportunities are not equally distributed across student populations, as low-income, commuting, and non-traditional students often struggle to meet the expectations associated with service-learning courses or choose to opt out of these learning experiences due to work or family commitments (Ender et al. 2000). Service-learning experiences can also reinforce, rather than challenge, stereotypes about vulnerable or disenfranchised groups in society (Becker and Paul 2015).

Scholars of service learning also point to the problem of community partner "buy-in" (Blouin and Perry 2009; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff 1994). While community partners are often initially eager to work with student populations, existing data tell us that organizations often struggle to manage student conduct (e.g., students not showing up or mishandling assigned tasks) and also feel that the expenditure of time and resources is one directional: students' managers give much of themselves without adequate "return" in terms of completed projects or deliverables (Blouin and Perry 2009; Bucher 2012). Students also report that, in some instances, community partners fall short of expectations by offering little supervision or by assigning overly difficult tasks.

Our paper aims to address three gaps in the literature on service learning and experiential education. First, our work brings student philanthropy to the attention of sociologists who may be considering service learning for their classrooms. Second, we assess some of the potential benefits and drawbacks of becoming an SLP donor as perceived by students themselves. Third, our work offers important insights about how students make sense of the monetary aspect of their relationships with community partners. It is our hope that this study will highlight the realities of student-led philanthropy from the perspective of students, so that sociology instructors can contemplate whether this method of service learning is appropriate for their courses and classrooms.

### **METHODS**

Data for this project were collected over two consecutive spring semesters from two cohorts of students attending a medium-sized, public university in a Midwestern suburb of the United States. The course in question is a small section of Honors Social Problems (capped at 20 students) that fulfills one of the university's general education requirements. The course is intended for (but not limited to) undergraduate honors students at the university and aims to provide students with a more rigorous and interactive learning experience than offered in larger sections of Social Problems where enrollment can be as high as 200 students.

Throughout each semester, enrolled students were required to reflect on their weekly experiences by writing journal entries. Students' journal entries were checked and graded three times during the semester by the instructor to ensure students were making adequate progress and responding to journal prompts. At the end of each semester, journals were inductively coded to ascertain how students perceived their service and philanthropic roles. This method of incorporating reflective journals has been used by other instructors engaged in service learning and is shown to play

a crucial role in the process of experiential learning, specifically in terms of generating new knowledge and challenging assumptions about the social world (Becker and Paul 2015; Peterson, Witt, and Huntington 2015; Seaman and Rheingold 2013). After combining all journal entries (N = 87 entries from 29 students), the authors had access to approximately 150 pages of journal entry data.

In addition to the journal data, the authors administered a 25-item questionnaire (15 close-ended and 10 open-ended questions) that asked students a series of questions about their service-learning experiences and how the philanthropic dimensions of the course (i.e., donating money) either enhanced or detracted from that experience. The questionnaire contained a series of closed-ended questions regarding student perceptions about the course, prior and current experiences with service learning, and student feelings about donating both time and money to nonprofit organizations. The open-ended items asked students to elaborate on their prior service-learning and philanthropic activities, their perceptions of service learning and philanthropy upon entering the course, their perceptions of how donating to community partners enhanced or detracted from their service-learning experiences, and what they found rewarding or unrewarding about the philanthropic dimensions of the course.

The course questionnaire was administered to students online in the last 10 days of the semester via an anonymous quiz function in the course management program Blackboard. Students could log on and complete the questionnaire at a time convenient to them over the 10-day period. The incentive for completing the questionnaire was several extra credit points, but students were told their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could opt out and earn extra credit in an alternative manner.

All questionnaire responses were summarized and reported in aggregate by the Blackboard program, and individual responses were not linked to individual students. Consent to participate was secured by asking each respondent to click a box on the questionnaire that read, "Yes, I agree to participate in this research study." Only those students who consented to participate (i.e., those who clicked the box) could go on to complete the questionnaire.

Regarding sample size, in 2010, 19 students enrolled in the course and participated in the service-learning project, 15 completed the questionnaire, and all turned in journals. In 2011, 10 students enrolled in the course, all participated in the service-learning project, nine completed the questionnaire, and all turned in the journals. In total, 24 students out of 29 completed the questionnaire and 29 out of 29 completed journal entries over the two semesters, producing a response rate of 83 percent for the web-based questionnaire and 100 percent for the journals. All open responses, including journal entries, were first coded line by line by the three authors independently to account for emergent themes, generating roughly 20 codes. Codes were then collapsed or eliminated based on the prominence and relevance of themes to the research question, namely codes tied to student perceptions of SLP. Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to help code, organize, and sort the data. The authors secured the requisite IRB approval prior to collecting all data discussed here.

In an effort to solicit community partner perspectives, the first author also distributed a short feedback survey to community partners at the end of each semester (using an Ohio Campus Compact template). While we received informal positive feedback via e-mail and phone, none of the community partners returned the survey. The lack of data from community partners represents not only a methodological weakness of the project but also a psychological defeat, since even those organizations who received funds did not provide formal feedback.

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Statistics*

The sample of Social Problems students was comprised largely of first-year (n = 6), second-year (n = 7) and third-year (n = 10) undergraduates, with (1) fourth-year student in the mix. All students considered themselves full time, and all but one were between 18–21 years old. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents were female (n = 21) and 12 percent (n = 3) were male. Eighty-eight percent (n = 21)

of the sample was white, 8 percent ( $n = 2$ ) was black, and 4 percent ( $n = 1$ ) identified racially as “other.” Relative to the general population of students on campus, our sample overrepresents whites and women. Of the 16 students who reported their GPA across the two courses, 13 indicated a GPA of 3.5 or higher. Just under half of the students (44 percent) were relatively high achieving in terms of academic performance. In 2010, 13 of 19 students were part of the university’s honors program; in 2011 all 10 were honors students.

Ninety-six percent of students in the sample ( $n = 23$ ) had never taken a course in philanthropy or service learning prior to enrolling in this Social Problems course, although 71 percent ( $n = 17$ ) of the students reported volunteering for a nonprofit organization and 62 percent ( $n = 15$ ) had previously donated to a nonprofit organization. So while our students had little in-class experience with service learning, the majority had some prior experience with volunteering and donating. These include activities in high school, at churches, and in sororities, fraternities, or other campus groups.

We asked students to evaluate their overall satisfaction with the Social Problems course, as a way of contextualizing the data about service learning and philanthropic giving. With respect to philanthropic giving, 67 percent of the students ( $n = 16$ ) found the grant/donation process to be “very rewarding,” 25 percent ( $n = 6$ ) found it “somewhat rewarding” and 8 percent ( $n = 2$ ) found it “neither rewarding nor unrewarding.” We also asked students to report whether, if they took the course again, they would prefer “a course with just service learning (volunteering),” “a course with both service learning and philanthropy (donating money),” “a course with just philanthropy,” or “a course with neither service learning nor philanthropy.” Eighty-three percent of students ( $n = 20$ ) reported that they would prefer “a course with both service learning and philanthropy.” The remaining students who responded to the question indicated they would prefer a “course with just service learning” ( $n = 2$ ) or a course with “neither service learning nor philanthropy” ( $n = 1$ ).

### **Qualitative Findings**

We analyzed the open-ended survey responses and journals with the intent of understanding students’ experiences with philanthropic service learning, specifically how they perceived being a donor as well as being a doer. Three clear themes emerge from the data in response to the above interest. First, student journals and the qualitative survey data show that philanthropic service learning gives students the perception of “making a difference” or “giving back” to their community partners, above and beyond a conventional service-learning experience. Second, students feel personally invested and engaged with their community organization as a direct result of the philanthropic component of the course. Finally, students believe that the PIF grant enriches their relationships with community partners and provides incentive for staff at organizations to take them seriously. In short, students appreciate the opportunity to be donors as well as doers.

### **Student Perceptions of Making an Impact**

In their open-ended responses and journal entries, most students make clear that the central reward of philanthropic service learning is the perception or feeling that donating money has a clear and positive impact on community service organizations. Students volunteered for a range of organizations, including homeless shelters, home building programs (e.g., Habitat for Humanity), domestic violence shelters, rape crisis centers, food pantries, community health clinics and financial literacy programs. Given that the course material in Social Problems encourages students to explore solutions to the problems of hunger, homelessness and lack of access to healthcare, it is not surprising that students wanted to “make a difference” in the places where they were volunteering.

Looking closely at student responses, it is apparent that students feel volunteering alone (i.e., the service component of the course) does not constitute a significant contribution to their community partner. The ability to donate money, however, shifts their perceptions about making a difference, as the following quotes from four different students illustrate:

It's totally different than just volunteering. To actually give something along with your time made the experiences so much more fulfilling.

I was very proud to be able to give the money to my organization because after witnessing the social problems I wanted to give them something more than a weekly visit.

Community service hours only go so far with organizations. We left a lasting impact on the people who we donated to because they could use that money to further help people in various ways.

It gives me a bigger sense of purpose (PIF). In our culture, money is often associated with power. So coming into these organizations with money to give provides evidence of our validity as well as our commitment to the process . . . Even though we know our presence helps, I like being able to give them something tangible.

Since the students were required to conduct a needs assessment of the organization prior to allocating funds, they became keenly aware of the financial struggles faced by community partners. As a result, it was rewarding for students to know exactly how donated money would be used and how it would benefit the organization and its clients. In the words of three students:

It was rewarding to know that such a positive and helpful organization can continue to go about their business and have a small part of their worries be taken care of by this grant. I feel that I was able to make a difference in the running of the organization and I hope they were given encouragement to continue on.

I think donating money enhanced my experience . . . knowing their needs made us know how we would successfully impact the organization with our donated monies.

When we got to know a lot more about the community organization we realized all their strengths and weaknesses. We understood that we could really help and it was great.

Students also recognize that philanthropic giving is something that they are not generally able to do as undergraduates, given that most live on tight budgets to pay for their schooling, food, and rent. Several respondents discussed the reward of being able to donate money at this juncture in their lives:

I think that the ability to donate money enhanced the experience because I felt like I could actually make a difference. While volunteering helped the organization, they could have made it by without me. The money, however, is a huge help to them that I could not normally provide.

I thought this [donating money] was a good idea because I could actually make a tangible difference at a non-profit which I normally would not have the money to do.

I knew that after volunteering, I had the means to make a difference. As a college student, I don't have the money to do these things.

As these accounts suggest, students find it immensely rewarding to donate money and perceive that they are making significant and meaningful contributions to their community partners, contributions that would be difficult for students to make outside the context of the course.

### **Student Engagement**

In addition to believing that their work with community partners constitutes a genuine contribution, students also report feeling more invested and engaged in the service-learning project itself as a result of their philanthropic activities. Students believe it is their responsibility to understand the inner workings of their organization as a way of ensuring that donations are well spent. As the following quotes illustrate, the students take seriously their role as donors, something that requires both attention to detail and a concerted commitment of time:

The thought that we would have money to give made me take the service even more seriously than I normally would have. I had to really observe my surroundings to decide whether the organization was worthy of receiving money.



It [the money] just gave me the confidence and a reason to be there. It made me pay attention more to how the organization is run.

I think the grant enhanced the experience because I was more observant of my surroundings, and more attentive as to what was going on in the organization. It made me really aware of everything that happened and everything that I did. I think that definitely made the experience richer.

For one student, the real benefit of the service experience came from watching other students engage seriously with the project. They commented that “one of the rewarding moments was seeing everyone in our class taking this project seriously and working hard for what we accomplished.” This individual’s reflection not only reinforces the idea that student engagement is potentially enhanced by SLP but that group-based learning—a central component of service learning—has the capacity to enhance the SLP experience for these students.

### ***Relationships with Community Partners***

Students in our sample also reported that the ability to give money positively affected how community partners viewed them. In short, students perceived themselves to be more legitimate vis-à-vis their community organizations, precisely because they had money to give:

I was excited because it [donating money] gave us credibility as volunteers.

I think the money added an extra element as we were able to be seen as professionals.

Because we were backed by money, I think the community partner right from the start knew we were serious about what we were trying to accomplish and therefore was more willing to let us into the workings of their organization.

Students talked about PIF money as “enhancing the relationship” with community partners in very specific ways. A number mentioned being “close” with their community partners and, as a result, receiving opportunities that they might not otherwise receive. These extra privileges translated to being granted access to clients or experiences that were off limits to other volunteers or receiving direct guidance and attention from directors of community service organizations. One student reported:

It [SLP] really does give the students a greater feeling of purpose and it helps the community partners to have a stronger push to allow the students to be more involved to strengthen their organization.

Interestingly, the students also mentioned the “perk” of flexibility. For example, they were granted more latitude in terms of scheduling, hours worked, and whether they even worked at all:

I feel the community partners were perhaps more lenient with what service we did and how much service we did knowing we would be donating money to them at the end of the semester.

The community partner took my group and I more seriously and was quite willing to help us find times to volunteer at their site when it was convenient for us, and not merely just them.

I feel the money enhanced my experience. I believe the community partners were more willing to allow us to interact with the clients even if that meant no work was done.

This last quote in particular suggests that some students felt they were beneficiaries of a more engaging volunteer experience as a result of the PIF funds—having access to rewarding opportunities rather than solely being relegated to grunt work.

### ***Potential Pitfalls of PIF***

While students across both sections of Social Problems perceived their philanthropic service-learning experiences as largely beneficial, especially when it came to fostering meaningful ties to community partners, concerns did emerge. First, students worried that the funding decisions (which

were made collectively, via discussion and ballot) would leave their partner with no money or not enough money to meet their needs. They worried the community partners would “feel bad” (in general and about them as individuals) if they were not allocated funds. Second, because students voted as a collective about where to donate money, there were times when discussions about who was deserving and who was undeserving emerged. Such discussions can be fruitful teaching moments for the students but can also devolve into unfounded or unfair critiques of organizations that are struggling.

### ***Frustrations over Funding***

Since the PIF process required that students vote as a class about where to allocate funds, a minority of students expressed concern about funding some organizations at the expense of others. One student commented that “it would be really hard to pick and choose what organization to give to” while another wrote that they “started to realize that I would not be content just donating to a few of the organizations since I can see that they all could use the money.” Students also worried how funding decisions would impact their relationship with community organizations and potentially affect relationships with students down the road. In the words of one student:

The organizations felt that they each deserved the money and were almost expecting it. And then if they were not awarded the grant, they might feel bitter or disappointed. They might not even be willing to be a participant for next year’s Social Problems class.

Other students explicitly stated that they did not “enjoy” voting on which groups to fund and several mentioned feeling “bad” or “guilty” that certain organizations were left out. Although such reservations were not universally shared, it is nonetheless important to recognize that some students acknowledged how important donations are to community partners and, as a result, felt conflicted (and in some cases regretful) about their philanthropic responsibilities.

### ***Constructing the Deserving Community Partner***

Perhaps more troubling than students’ reservations about philanthropic decision-making, is the finding that students sometimes make uncritical or uninformed decisions about which community partners are deserving of funds. An example from the course illustrates the point. During the first semester of Honors Social Problems, one of the student groups chose to work with a financial literacy organization that was affiliated with local social services. The students worked with low-income adults who needed to file a tax return and had never done so before (the goal being to ensure that they receive the Earned Income Tax Credit). In their journal entries and in-class presentations, students in this group spoke highly of the organization’s staff and clients and appeared dedicated to their volunteer work. In the final week of the course, the group was asked to make a case for their community partner and explain to the class how PIF funds would help address unmet needs of the organization (each group in the class was asked to give a similar presentation). Much to everyone’s surprise, the students argued that their partner did not “deserve” funding because it was part of an unrestrained state bureaucracy and that the clients appeared “less needy” than those at other organizations (because many had jobs and could hypothetically file tax returns without assistance). Moreover, the organization itself was vilified by the student volunteers for being tied to local government, a reality the students likened to a “leg of an evil spider” that uses its web to trap resources and clients. And while students in this group were sympathetic to the low-income individuals and families served by the organization, they persuaded the rest of the class that any hardship faced by the clients paled in comparison to those faced by the homeless children or domestic violence victims also being considered for funding. Despite the fact that several students, the teaching assistant, and instructor all questioned this characterization of the community partner—calling upon previous class discussions of the deserving and undeserving poor and the myths of the “vampire state”—the group’s anti-

government rhetoric prevailed. In the end, the class voted unanimously to not fund the financial literacy program.

Some students also found community partners “undeserving” if the organization expressed overt interest in winning funds. Even though most students perceived that PIF funding affords them some legitimacy and privilege in the setting, they still expected the organization to proceed as though the money was not a primary factor in the relationship. One student who voted against his organization wrote, “it seemed that they cared more about getting the money than the fact that we were volunteering for them.” Another wrote that the PIF funds detracted from the relationship with the community partner because “they [the partner] were focused on getting the money.” It is not clear from these few data points how exactly the community partner communicated to the student that they were primarily focused on the donation, but in a sense these details are immaterial. Students had the power to construct a partner as undeserving (either in their own mind or publicly to the rest of the class) and these constructions could influence whether or not students individually, or even collectively, voted to donate funds to a site.

## DISCUSSION

Sociology as a discipline has long used service learning as a way of offering students “real world” experiences while also encouraging them to put their sociological imaginations into practice (Ollilainen 2001). Experiential philanthropy or student-led philanthropy (SLP) share similar goals and objectives as conventional service learning, with the added dimension of philanthropic giving. Although there is little evidence that SLP has yet caught on in the discipline, our data suggest that sociology students perceive philanthropic giving to be rewarding and believe the act of giving enhances the overall service-learning experience. They welcome the shift from doer to donor.

Students in our sample feel they are making a difference in their communities and that the money constitutes more of a contribution than volunteering alone. Our respondents also describe feeling engaged in their service experiences as a result of philanthropic giving, if for no other reason than they feel a responsibility to understand and research an organization they might ultimately fund (whether they actually do make responsible funding decisions is something we discuss below). Finally, students believe community partner organizations take students more seriously in the setting and provide more enriching volunteer opportunities as a result of the grant money. Our findings are consistent with the nascent literature on SLP that suggests students enjoy and learn from philanthropic service learning (Olberding 2009).

Our data also show there are two possible pitfalls associated with this type of experiential philanthropy. First, some students feel conflicted about making the decision to fund some partners and not others; for these students, picking and choosing awardees is uncomfortable and could have negative consequences for building lasting relationships with organizations. Second, the process by which the class selects grant awardees can be challenging for instructors to moderate and, as the example of the “evil spider” shows, easily influenced by the opinions and rhetoric of a minority of students. These pitfalls suggest that instructors who utilize experiential philanthropy must be sensitive and thoughtful about the decision-making process and determine ways to ensure that students do not leverage financial resources to reinforce commonly held stereotypes about organizations or clients (Hollis 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff 1994). In our second year of teaching Social Problems we employed several techniques to try ensure a fair process: utilizing a secret ballot for voting; allowing adequate time for class debate and discussion about the donation decision; and asking students to write a short journal entry about the final outcome.

With respect to the last technique, instructors can potentially review these journal entries before funds are formally allocated and, if need be, return to the class for further discussion. Of course, instructors can potentially eliminate the problem of students finding organizations “undeserving” of funds by making clear to students at the outset that all organizations will receive funds or by

constructing a SLP course around one, rather than multiple, community partners. We chose not to go this route to empower the students to make their own funding decisions.

Despite the challenges, we suggest that experiential philanthropy is potentially beneficial with respect to student engagement in service learning. Anyone who has taught an experiential learning course that requires some form of community engagement is well aware that students often feel like their contributions or abilities to make change are negligible. Students in our SLP Social Problems courses, by contrast, perceive that their volunteer work and their donations matter. It is an unanswered empirical question as to whether their contributions do in fact make a difference to the community partners, but we argue that irrespective of quantifiable impact, it is important that students believe their actions make a difference, such that they continue to participate in and donate to their communities as they mature. As Olberding (2012) suggests, philanthropic experiences during time spent in college powerfully shape the likelihood that students go on to give and volunteer later in life. The fact that our students believed their efforts to be of value bodes well for their future behavior in and out of college and also suggests that experiential philanthropy may be a very useful tool for helping instructors “plant the seed” about community engagement.

Student-led philanthropy, as our case illustrates, also has the potential to remedy the problem of lack of buy-in from community partners. As several scholars note, community organizations are often reluctant to invest fully in students, especially when volunteer projects are short term (one to two weeks) or when students fail to take their commitments seriously (Blouin and Perry 2009). Our data suggest that students believe community partners take them more seriously and that relationships are enhanced as a result of the PIF grant. It is important to note, however, that we do not have community partner perspectives on the Pay It Forward program, so we rely on student accounts to make our claims. We do believe that our findings point to the possibility that experiential philanthropy is one potential way that the relationship between students and community partners can be maximized. But it is also possible that this process damages relationships with community partners who are not funded. We did not encounter that problem, and we believe it is because we were very clear in our written and verbal correspondence with community partners that not all organizations are funded in a given cycle. Again, further research that incorporates the perspectives of community partners is needed to fully ascertain how experiential philanthropy impacts the various stakeholders.

At this point, the reader may be wondering if we assume that universities, colleges, departments, and instructors all have access to monetary resources to make SLP work. To the contrary, our assumption is that most institutions of higher learning do not have funds to support this kind of curricular innovation. In fact, after receiving funding for three years from Ohio Campus Compact, the first author no longer receives external funding for her experiential philanthropy course. Although frustrating that dollars can be fleeting, experiential philanthropy does not (and should not) rely solely on the funding of nonprofits or local, state, or federal funders. If direct funds are not available, student-led philanthropy can happen indirectly, as students work *with* organizations to raise money or solicit external grants (Olberding 2009). Students can also raise their own funds to donate. Since running out of PIF dollars, students in our Social Problems Honors courses have organized benefit concerts, gift card sales, and book drives to help support their community partners. Anecdotally, it seems that the amount of money raised and donated does not appear to radically alter student engagement and perceptions that they are contributing to their communities, although further data collection is required to fully assess whether there are differences in student engagement and learning depending on amounts raised and whether students raise money personally or have the money gifted from another source, such as PIF.

### ***Limitations and Directions for Future Research***

Some of the limitations of this study have been mentioned above, the most significant of which is the lack of formal feedback from community partners. Although it can be tricky to solicit feedback from local organizations whose employees are often overworked and difficult to pin down, future

scholarship on experiential philanthropy would benefit from greater attention to the partners' experiences. Only then can we truly begin to assess the benefits of student-led philanthropy on community organizations and the people they serve.

This study also draws from a relatively small number of students ( $N = 24$ ) and is largely comprised of white women in an honors track. Due to their academic records, socioeconomic backgrounds, and life experiences, these students may experience philanthropic giving in ways that are significantly different from the general population of students. To build upon the findings we have outlined here, future studies should explore whether student perceptions of experiential philanthropy vary depending on student characteristics (e.g., honors v. non-honors, traditional v. non-traditional, commuter v. resident) and axes of identification (e.g. race, class, gender identity).

Finally, future work on student-led philanthropy should employ quasi-experimental design to create a "control" class that is service learning only, without the philanthropic dimensions. This would allow scholars of teaching and learning to better assess whether findings reported in this paper—especially those related to making a difference, engagement, and community partner relationships—are truly different in experiential philanthropy courses, relative to conventional service-learning courses.

## CONCLUSION

This article considers whether and how student-led philanthropy enhances service learning in social problems honors courses. As reported by students, SLP gives students a clear feeling of making a difference vis-à-vis community needs, a heightened sense of engagement at their volunteer site, and perceptions of quality ties to community partners. Although future research is needed to determine the exact "value added" of experiential philanthropy, and how this value may vary across groups, this study suggests that SLP may be a welcome addition to service learning in the field of sociology.

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