Students’ Perception of a Required Community Service in Kenya

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Students’ Perception of a Required Community Service in Kenya  
Rispa A. Odongo, EdD

**Problem**
The X University attempts to foster in students a culture and habit of providing service to others and initiated community service in 2004, which requires all students to complete 200 hours of service to community before graduation. The effectiveness of the program had not been assessed from students’ perspectives.

**Purpose**
The purpose of the study was to explore students’ perceptions on how the required community service influences their attitudes towards being philanthropic and affecting positive social change.

**Significance**
Universities in Kenya are expected to offer services to the communities by finding solutions to societal social, political, cultural and economic problems as part of university education (Ondigi, 2011), help address poverty levels reported at 49.8% in 2013 (KIPPRA, 2013). This study may:

- Strengthen understanding how community service influences students attitude to be philanthropic.
- Demonstrate that community service is making a change in students’ lives.
- Lead to improvement of community service at X University for the benefit of students, university and partnering communities.

**Social Change Implications**
The formative evaluation can be a model for evaluating community service in other universities. Many X University students continue to be engaged in community service as part of giving back to society, and therefore the communities to which they provide service will continue to benefit.

Kenya government can expand community service to students at all levels of education, from primary school to university, for wider positive social change.

**Theoretical Framework**
The conceptual framework was the experiential learning model (Kolb & Kolb’s, 2006), and its four aspects: concrete experience; reflective observation; abstract conceptualization; and active experimentation.

**Relevant Scholarship**
Benefits of community service to students include:

- Instills good citizenship, community-building skills (Aftandilian & Dart, 2013).
- Helps connect community experience with classroom theory (Kajner et al., 2013).
- Increased awareness of the realities of communities, and finding solutions (Campbell, Dole, & Palombaro, 2011; Prohaska, 2013).
- Development of tolerance and trust for others, appreciate racial, cultural, and economic diversity (Johnson, 2013).
- Appreciation of value of teamwork in collaborations, and leadership (Plumber, et al., 2011).
- Receive real life experiences of responsibilities, frustrations, and rewards (Lardner, 2014; Leisey et al., 2012).
- Change in students attitude is sustained after service (Golberg & Coufal, 2009; Taylor and Raykov, 2014; Hatcher & Struder, 2015).

**Challenges**
Two paradigms exist, community service as charity or as transformative (Verges, 2010); should focus be on students or community (Stoeker, 2003)?
Students tend to focus on personal benefits.
It puts pressure on already packed curriculum.

**Research Questions**

**RQ1:** What are students’ perceptions of their involvement in identifying the community service program activities?
**RQ2:** How do students describe their experiences with community service program?
**RQ3:** How do students describe the influence of the community service program on their own philanthropy and affecting positive social change?

**Participants**
Purposive sampling was used to identify 13 4th-year undergraduate students who had participated in the community service program during their 1st-year of study.

**Procedures**

**Design**
Qualitative case study was used to have a deeper understanding of how students perceive the required community service in influencing their attitude to be philanthropic by focusing on individuals’ experiences.

**Data Collection**
- One-on-one semi-structured interview protocol, containing interview questions based on the research questions.
- All interviews took about 1.5 hours and were conducted in the same room, providing same environment.

**Analysis**
I transcribed audio-recorded interview responses; labeled segments as codes to build themes answering the research questions; aligned them to the conceptual framework; reduced codes overlaps and redundancy; collapsed identified themes into fewer ones, and finally summarized them into 4 themes.

**Findings**
From the 4 themes that emerged showed that:

- University and external support were essential for successful community service by students, giving them first hand experience of neediness.
- Students developed positive academic, social, and spiritual values (linking theory to practice, humility, empathy, compassion, philanthropy, patience, respect for others cultures, improved intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships).
- Students recognized their own self-worth and fulfillment in giving back to society.
- Many students continue to participate in community activities after engagement by helping the needy.

**Interpretation**
The required community service program met its goals by influencing and changing students’ attitudes to be sensitive to people with needs, and instilling in them a sense of philanthropy.

The study strengthened understanding of community service at X University.

**Limitations**
The study was limited to X University students who had reported positive impact of the community service.

The X University is a high selective university, students are mostly from upper economic spectrum; there is possibility that the impact is more evident for privileged students. The less privileged students from other universities in Kenya may not have similar experiences.

There is no guarantee that the change in students attitude to be philanthropic will be sustained through career lives (Goldberg & Coufal, 2009).

**Recommendations**
- The X University need to assess the community service sites to ensure that they meet the criteria of neediness for better students’ experience.
- Students be given background information on the moral values behind community service to minimize frustration during the initial weeks of engagement.
- Kenya Government should consider extending the required community service to other levels of education.
- Further research is needed to assess sustainability of philanthropic spirit to career life; assess student impression on community service before and after engagement.

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