

# STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN ACADEMIC SERVICE-LEARNING OVER THE COURSE OF THE SEMESTER

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Academic service-learning (AS-L) pedagogy helps students translate theory into practice, understand issues facing their communities, and enhance personal development (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hardy & Schaen, 2000; Simons & Clearly, 2006). Students' motivation in AS-L increases when students gain insight into their values and goals (Brody & Wright, 2004; Duffy & Raque-Bogdan, 2010). This study identifies factors that increase and decrease student motivation in AS-L and explores ways to support students throughout the semester. At the beginning, middle, and end of the semester, participants completed questionnaires that elicited their reasons for their changes in motivation. Quantitative analyses revealed a decrease in motivation over the course of the semester and interaction between gender and student motivation. Males' motivation peaked at mid-semester, while females' motivation started at high levels and declined over the course of the semester. Qualitative analysis found that motivation increased when students enjoyed the AS-L experience, were interested in helping people, formed relationships with clients and community partners, and felt responsible to community partners. Motivation decreased due to lack of communication with community partners, lack of integration between the course and the AS-L experience, transportation issues, and difficulty with the time demands on student schedules.

*Keywords:* student motivation, academic service-learning

College students enroll in academic service-learning courses to gain applied disciplinary knowledge by engaging in a real-world experience in the local community. Kronick (2007) defined academic service-learning (AS-L) as "the process of integrating active assistance in the community into the learning that is occurring in the classroom" (p. 300). Research has shown that AS-L enables students to apply theory to practice, better understand issues facing the community, and enhance personal development (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hardy & Schaen, 2000; Simons

& Clearly, 2006). Students start the course with certain goals and expectations for the semester. As the semester proceeds, students experience successes and failures that influence their motivation and commitment to the AS-L experience. This study examines students' motivation for engaging in AS-L over the course of the semester.

Chesbrough (2011) found that college students' initial reasons for participating in service opportunities are often external, such as enhancing their resume, but as time goes on they become more internally motivated. The

reason for this shift in motivation comes from the students “feeling strongly about a cause and wanting to contribute” (p. 702). Student motivation in AS-L increases when students gain insight into their values and goals (Brody & Wright, 2004; Duffy & Raque-Bogdan, 2010). Students’ exposure to real-world experience helps equip them for careers later on in life. As a result of such experiences, students indicated that they would recommend service-learning to their peers and that service-learning had been an ideal environment in which to explore multiple career paths (Overall, 2010).

A major factor that influences student motivation throughout an AS-L course is gender. For example, female students tend to have significantly higher levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation than males for college in general (Brouse, Basch, LeBlanc, McKnight, & Lei, 2010). Chesbrough (2011) found that male students are often reluctant to engage in service opportunities due to lack of awareness of these opportunities, lack of interest, concerns about time, and not being asked to participate. Male college students who do participate in AS-L courses describe their service roles as a “societal duty,” while females participate for the relationships they form, which are “based in emotional and subjective personal commitment” (Chesbrough, 2011, p. 702).

Students are motivated by their expectations for themselves as well as their expectations for their community partners. When students arrive at their AS-L site, they want community partners to be organized and ready to capitalize on the students’ skills. When this does not occur students may become dissatisfied with AS-L. Students express frustration when the professor and community partner have not developed shared goals and direction for the students. In such cases, students may indicate an interest in selecting their own placements to better capitalize on their skills.

Time also presents a continual challenge for students: Students want to spend a significant amount of time with their community partners, but are concerned about how to manage their busy schedules (Rosing, Reed, Ferrari, & Bothne, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that increase and decrease students’ motivation throughout their AS-L courses and to explore instructional strategies that may increase students’ ongoing commitment to community organizations. While much literature addresses the benefits of academic service-learning, little research has addressed the issue of disengagement or investigated ways to maintain or increase student commitment to AS-L over time. The value of our research therefore resides both in recognizing the challenges students face in AS-L courses and in its potential to address these difficulties by offering students greater means of support during their AS-L courses.

## Method

### *Participants*

The study included 134 college students, 37 males and 97 females, attending a private liberal arts institution in the Southeast. Twenty-four percent of the students were first-year students, 58% were second-year students, 13% were third-year students, and 5% were fourth-year students. All were traditional age college students. Sixteen percent of the students were from a foreign language class, 40% were from a communications course, 28% were from a human services course, and 16% were from a psychology course. Of the participants, 30.6% were required to complete between 11 and 20 service hours, 0.7% between 21 and 30 hours, 29.1% between 31 and 40 hours, and 39.6% needed 41 or more hours. Fifty-eight percent of the AS-L site locations were nonprofits, 30% were public schools, 4% were for-profit organizations, 3% were community colleges, 2% were govern-

ment organizations, and the remaining 3% were other types of organizations.

#### *Instrument and Procedures*

Participants completed a questionnaire about their motivation at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester. The questionnaire assessed the participants' current level of motivation to go to their service site. For example, "On a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being not at all motivated and 6 being highly motivated, please rate your motivation to go to your academic service-learning site." This item was followed by a series of open-ended questions that elicited students' feedback on the factors influencing their motivation level.

While the same questionnaire was administered at three points in the semester, some additional open-ended questions were added over the course of the semester. The beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire contained questions about students' expectations for their sites and anticipated levels of motivation throughout the semester. The questionnaire completed in the middle of the semester required participants to describe how their level of motivation had changed while working with their site. The end-of-the-semester questionnaire included questions about the challenges and benefits of the experience and asked students to evaluate whether their expectations had been met and whether their attitudes about service-learning had changed by the end of the semester.

#### *Data Analysis*

The questionnaires were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. In this mixed-method approach, the quantitative data uncovers trends while the qualitative data illuminates the specific, nuanced influences on student motivation. Quantitative analysis in the form of repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to assess motivation change over time.

A mixed-factor repeated measures ANOVA was also run to investigate the relationship between gender and motivation change over time.

Open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively for frequency in responses. Each response was typed up verbatim for analysis. The key questions that guided the analysis included:

- At what point in the semester does students' motivation in their AS-L courses fluctuate?
- Are there gender differences related to changes in student motivation throughout the semester?
- What factors increase and decrease student motivation in AS-L courses?

Each open-ended question was coded and then analyzed for patterns across responses. These patterns, known as categories, are "a group or cluster used to sort parts of the data" (Boeije, 2010, p. 95). We then compared the findings of the open-ended questions to the quantitative results.

## **Results**

### *Changes in Motivation over the Course of the Semester*

Student motivation was assessed at three points: the beginning ( $m = 4.71$ ), middle ( $m = 4.43$ ), and end ( $m = 4.08$ ) of the semester. Analysis revealed a significant main effect for time on student motivation; students reported a significant decrease in motivation to go to their site over the course of the semester,  $F(2, 224) = 12.55, p < .001$ . Figure 1 illustrates the change in student motivation over the course of the semester.

### *Gender Differences in Motivational Changes over the Course of the Semester*

A mixed-factor analysis conducted to assess the relationship between gender and students' motivation over time to visit the site revealed a significant interaction between

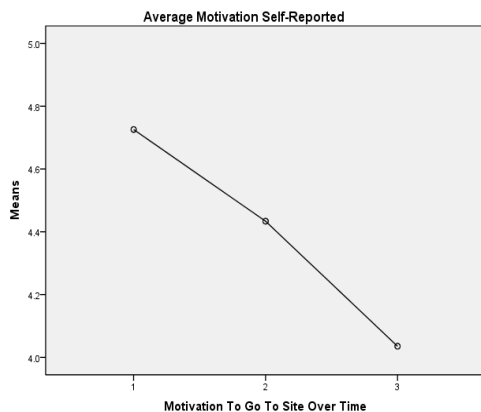


Figure 1. Mean difference values of student motivation to go to their site at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester.

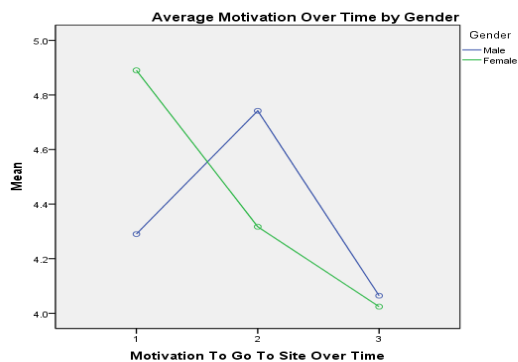


Figure 2. Mean difference values of females' and males' motivation to go to their AS-L site at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester.

gender and motivation ( $F(2, 222) = 5.82, p = 0.003$ ). Female college students began the semester with high levels of motivation; however, as the semester progressed that motivation steadily declined ( $m = 4.31$ ). In contrast, males experienced a slight increase in motivation to visit their site during the middle of the semester ( $m = 4.79$ ), which then declined by the final assessment. Figure 2 illustrates gender differences related to changes in motivation over the course of the semester.

#### *Factors That Increase or Decrease Student Motivation over the Semester*

Qualitative analysis of open-ended items revealed that motivation increases when students enjoy the experience, have an interest in helping people, form relationships with the clients and community partner, and feel a sense of responsibility to the community partner. Student motivation decreased as a result of communication problems with the community partner, lack of integration between the course and the AS-L experience, transportation issues, and difficulty with the time demands on student schedules.

At the beginning of the semester female students were motivated to take their AS-L course by a desire to help people in need and contribute to the community, while male students were motivated by factors such as needing to complete a course requirement, or wanting to enhance their resume. A female participant stated, "I hope to learn more about how to make a difference and actually see my hard work change hundreds of people." This student wanted to form relationships with community partners but also make a larger impact on society. Male students' motivation going into the semester was more narrow in desired impact, focusing on meeting the course requirements, getting to know people in the community, or needing to complete academic requirements. One male participant stated at the beginning of the semester that his motivation for participating in an AS-L course was to "create my first ad campaign." Both male and female students were motivated at the beginning of the semester, but their expectations for the course and the impact of their work was different. Additionally, both female and male students expressed concerns about

the AS-L course being too time-consuming.

In the mid-semester questionnaire, students identified factors that had increased or decreased their motivation. By mid-semester both the males and females had formed relationships with their community partners and clients. The male students' motivation peaked due to their lower expectations at the beginning of the semester, while the females' motivation decreased as a result of their high expectations for the AS-L experience at the beginning of the semester. A male student shared, "I think my motivation has increased. I say this because initially, I was hesitant to take the class but I quickly found out that it was very insightful and enjoyable." A female student shared, "My motivation has diminished slightly since the beginning of the course. I think it is because I don't have a relationship with my amiga [student]. I am still motivated to go, however, because my grade depends on it."

Both male and female students identified getting to know the community partner and clients as a motivating factor. The factors identified as decreasing student motivation included transportation issues in getting to the site, scheduling issues with the community partner, unsatisfactory relationships with the clients, and trouble balancing the time commitment of AS-L with other responsibilities. As one student explained, "Having enough time, and trying to make sure that the activities don't conflict with my schedule" were key factors affecting motivation.

At the end of the semester, some students' motivation had increased while others' had decreased. The two main factors that increased motivation at this point in the semester were getting to know the clients and community partner better and not wanting to let the organization down. Students described this commitment to the community organization as "Knowing they are depending on us." Similar to the findings at mid-semester, the main fac-

tors that decreased student motivation were balancing the time demands of being a student with spending time at the site and issues of transportation. Emphasizing this point, one student explained, "The challenging part was finding transportation and balancing the time to go. In addition, other organizations and the academic workload was at its peak, which made it somewhat difficult." However, students who experienced a decrease in motivation nevertheless recognized the value of their AS-L courses and reported that they would recommend these courses to other students. One hundred and ten students would recommend the course to other students, while 24 students would not recommend the course.

In their recommendations for addressing issues of motivation, students suggested that faculty spend more time meeting with community partners, provide more direction, and be more supportive and understanding of the challenges students face in balancing other commitments with the demands of the AS-L course. Students want faculty to "be in more contact with the head of the organization to ensure students aren't wasting their time" with nothing to do, and to "prepare agencies better for what students should get out of volunteering." Students also reported that "the instructor giving [the students] more direction about what [they are] supposed to do in [difficult] situations" would have enhanced their AS-L experience. Finally, because students' motivation decreased due to the challenges in balancing their AS-L commitment with other responsibilities, students recommended that faculty "work with [student] schedules and also do not change our itinerary that was given in the beginning."

## Discussion

Our findings suggest that overall students experience a decrease in motivation for providing service as the semester progresses. Female students begin with a very high level of motivation, while males' motivation is in

the high range but much lower than that of females. By the middle of the semester, the female students' motivation has decreased and the male students' motivation has increased above that of the female students. At the end of the semester both male and female students reported that the demands on their time had led to a decrease in motivation.

It is important to note that while their motivation decreased significantly from the beginning to the end of the semester, the students were still highly motivated and would recommend the AS-L course to other students. Similar to the findings of previous research, the students in this study recognize the value of AS-L courses and would recommend them to their peers (Overall, 2010). Factors that increased student motivation also mirrored the findings of past studies, in that students' motivation increased when they felt they were making a difference in the community (Brody & Wright, 2004; Duffy & Raque-Bogden, 2010). Again consistent with previous research, student motivation was found to decrease when students felt that their time was not used effectively, when they encountered scheduling problems, when they had transportation problems, and when the community partner and teacher had different goals (Rosing et al., 2010).

Unlike previous research on AS-L, this study also explored gender differences in student motivation at three points in the semester. Motivation decreased from the beginning to the end of the semester for both male and female students; however, males had a slight increase in motivation at mid-semester. Similar to Chesbrough's (2011) research highlighting male students' apprehension about offering service, we found that male students started the semester with lower levels of motivation, but those levels increased at mid-semester after they got to know the clients and the organization.

While yielding a number of important

findings related to student motivation in AS-L, this study has some limitations as well. One of the main limitations is the unequal number of males and females. Thus while gender differences were found, these findings should be interpreted with caution. Additionally, over 80% percent of the students were first- or second-year students; third- and fourth-year students may have fewer problems with time management and transportation. Further research should be conducted with a larger and more balanced population of males and females and students of varying ages.

Despite its limitations, the present study makes a significant contribution to the larger body of research on AS-L. The study found additional factors that cause student motivation to increase and decrease, and the results enhance our understanding of how to organize academic service-learning courses most effectively. Faculty need to be aware that students' motivation does decrease over the course of the semester, but that does not mean students do not value the service-learning course. AS-L faculty may want to develop a plan with their students in advance for dealing with this expected decrease in motivation.

Future research should explore ways that students can maintain or even increase their motivation over the course of the semester. Additionally, it would be advantageous to explore the gender differences in motivation for AS-L and to investigate how instructors and students can capitalize on the male mid-semester peak in motivation.

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