



How Student Race, Gender, and Class Affect the Impact of Experiential Philanthropy Courses

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For several decades, higher education institutions across the United States have sought out opportunities to engage students in meaningful civic experiences using a range of pedagogical approaches. Many of these approaches to teaching are considered “high impact practices,” a specific set of 11 practices in higher education that have been shown to enhance student learning and retention. Service-learning is an example of a high impact practice that integrates academic study, community engagement, and reflection to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. One form of service-learning is called experiential philanthropy, which teaches students about charitable giving using hands-on classroom experiences. In these courses, students receive real money (often ranging from \$100-\$10,000 per class) and make decisions about distributing this money to local nonprofit organizations.

In my previous research on experiential philanthropy courses through the Pay it Forward Student Philanthropy Initiative, I found that certain course activities – particularly those that involve higher levels of engagement – are influential in shifting students’ future philanthropic, volunteer, and work plans. I also found that there was variation in these outcomes based on whether or not students had prior experiences with philanthropy or the nonprofit sector. I became interested in investigating whether these outcomes differed for students by race, gender, and socioeconomic status and prior engagement in philanthropy and other nonprofit sector activities.

WHY RESEARCH COURSE IMPACT BY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUP?

Not all young people have equitable access to philanthropy and other nonprofit early on in life. Disparities in civic participation exist between youth with higher and lower socioeconomic status, between White youth and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), and between males and females, finding that higher-socioeconomic status, White, and female youth have better access to civic opportunities.

Research also shows that students’ social identities and lived experiences inform how they engage with and respond to community engagement experiences in higher education: students from historically marginalized populations tend to benefit more from engaging in high impact practices than other students, White students and males are less positive about the perceived value of experiential philanthropy courses, and students with lower-socioeconomic status have the highest returns upon graduating from college. Moreover, service-learning may have very little or no effect on students who already have high levels of exposure to nonprofits and intentions to engage in nonprofit or civic life.

Given this previous research, I sought to understand whether experiential philanthropy courses have less of an effect on students who start off with higher levels of prior nonprofit experiences, whether these differences vary by race, gender, and socioeconomic status, and how these differences might impact future nonprofit engagement.

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES AND DEMOGRAPHICS AFFECT OUTCOMES

Overall, my research finds that female, White, and more affluent students have higher levels of prior exposure to nonprofit sector activities (e.g., volunteering, philanthropic discussions and engagement, experience with service-learning, experience working in the nonprofit sector), and benefit differently from these courses than their counterparts who are male or BIPOC and those with lower socioeconomic status.

Pathways into the nonprofit sector look different for college students. While BIPOC students had higher levels of work experience in the nonprofit sector than did White students, and White students were more likely to talk about philanthropy with their parents than were BIPOC students. Further, consistent with previous research, females enrolled in these courses have more prior experience with nonprofit activities than males, and students with higher socioeconomic status had more prior exposure to nonprofit activities than students with lower socioeconomic status.

I also found that specific nonprofit sector activities earlier in life—such as participation in servicelearning in high school—had more of an effect on males, White students, and students with high socioeconomic status than did some of the other prior nonprofit experiences. For instance, prior exposure to service-learning in college was associated with no change in future nonprofit engagement across all students, and prior exposure to volunteering was associated with no change in future nonprofit engagement across all students except males. In addition, females were more likely to pursue work in the nonprofit sector – regardless of their prior nonprofit experiences. However, males – particularly those who had previously discussed philanthropy with their parents – were more likely to pursue work in the nonprofit sector after graduation.

MOVING FORWARD

This study not only suggests that prior nonprofit experiences affect experiential philanthropy course outcomes, but also that exposure to specific types of prior nonprofit experiences can influence whether students are likely to be civically engaged in the future. When considering experiential philanthropy courses within the context of service-learning as a high-impact practice, we, as scholars, instructors, and practitioners, must consider who may benefit the most from this pedagogical practice. Future work must continue to explore the nuances around these findings, including further examination into the pedagogical approaches and activities that may influence course outcomes. Examining additional identity characteristics such as immigration status, sexual orientation, political ideology, language, and geographical area could invite additional insights into this work. Finally, researching these outcomes at more diverse higher education institutions (e.g., historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, tribal colleges) is an important next step in this work for a better understanding of whether and how institutional context matters for students engaging in this high-impact practice.