

Boosting Empathy and Promoting Networking through Service Learning

Jacqueline J. Evans, Ph.D.
Psychology Department
The University of Texas at Austin
108 E. Dean Keeton Stop A8000, Austin, TX 78712
j.evans@utexas.edu

Summary

According to a meta-analysis spanning several decades, empathy in college students appears to be on the decline overall (Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing, 2010). Notably, however, empathy and related interpersonal skills are increasingly in demand by employers in today's job market, and popular press articles quoting CEOs have even reported on this for Fortune and Forbes magazines (e.g., Colvin, 2014). Empathy and emotional intelligence are argued to be central to effective leadership and hiring employees who exhibit empathy confers significant benefits for organizations (George, 2000). Given the value of empathy in the workplace, college students benefit from opportunities to develop greater empathy both personally and professionally.

Service learning offers a unique opportunity to meet several crucial learning objectives. Service learning provides valuable volunteer service to one's community while connecting their volunteer experience with classroom curricula to develop deeper levels of learning. Through student reflective writing at various stages of their service work, students demonstrate better learning and a significant boost in their empathy (Wilson, 2011). Service learning may also function as an important practical tool for getting students connected with real-world organizations and potential employers who value students with skills provided by an undergraduate psychology education. Finally, by venturing off-campus and seeing professionals in their organizational roles, students may come to better understand career paths and better direct their future academic and employment goals.

Participant Idea Exchange Questions:

- 1) What types of organizations exist in your community, and how are the services they provide or their needs related to your course content or themes?
- 2) How can we further deepen empathy building for service learning students and better prepare them to become interpersonally skilled employees and thoughtful citizens?
- 3) What are some important ways that we can protect students, clients, our academic institutions, and ourselves from potential pitfalls when designing effective service learning assignments?

References

- George, J. M. (2000). Emotions and leadership: The role of emotional intelligence. *Human Relations*, 53(8), 1027–1055. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726700538001>
- Konrath, S. H., O'Brien, E. H., & Hsing, C. (2011). Changes in dispositional empathy in American college students over time: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(2), 180–198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868310377395>
- Wilson, J.C. (2011). Service-learning and the development of empathy in U.S. college students. *Education & Training*, 53(2-3), 207-217. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/00400911111115735>
- Colvin, G. (2014, September 4). *Employers are looking for new hires with something extra: Empathy.* Fortune. <https://fortune.com/2014/09/04/employers-new-hires-empathy/>