

## **Promoting Civic Engagement through a Service Learning Experience**

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### **Abstract**

*In recent decades, many indicators of civic involvement among adolescents have declined. While debate continues about advantages and disadvantages of mandating community service in universities, the practice of compelling adolescents to participate in community service is increasingly common. This study explores the civic behaviours, opinions, knowledge and dispositions of undergraduate students through their participation in a community-based intercultural leadership program in Vietnam. In this program, students from six different countries were made to visit poor village entrepreneurs and offer their assistance in business improvement. Preliminary findings suggest that students who are competent for civic action, justice oriented, personally responsible and have high civic accountability, enjoy the service learning experience in the village. Students who rate the community service program as meaningful, exciting and educational are more compelled to participate voluntarily in the coming year. The goal of this research is to affirm a set of civic measures that are appropriate for use with youth participants in community service so as to promote civic education and inculcate civic engagement as lifelong practice.*

**Keyword:** civic engagement, service learning, community service

### **Introduction**

In the realm of advanced technology, the importance of social interaction and network webbing the community, the essence of social responsibilities, social trust as well as democratic citizenship expected of all residents in this universal, are often neglected. There is evidence that increasing numbers of Americans perceive their society to be suffering a moral decline (Galston, 2007). A half century ago, more than 50 percent of Americans responded affirmatively when asked, “Do you think people in general lead as good lives—honest and moral—as they used to?” By 2002, it had fallen even further, to only 21 percent. This perception of moral decline is especially pronounced in citizens’ evaluations of young people. When asked, “Do you think that young people today have as strong a sense of right and wrong as they did, say, 50 years ago?” Fifty-seven percent answered affirmatively in 1952, and today, that figure has bottomed out at only 19 percent (Anonymous, 2002). Such decline and ignorance in civic behaviours and civic knowledge further create gaps among the modern apes, threatening social cohesion and global prosperity. Sustainable cities for sustainable community which call for poverty eradication, environmental protection, water and energy conservation program, green building program and such often fail due to poor public participation. In addressing such concern, many universities have taken the initiative to increase awareness among the adolescents in campuses by adopting civic education or implementing a series of service learning program.

### **Background of study**

In a study conducted by Hollander (2011), most respondents representing the research universities describe civic education as: “service-learning or community-based learning and engaged research and/or scholarship”.

Of the campuses participated in the study, 60 percent mentioned these phrases. University of Minnesota and the University of Oklahoma defined engagement as the partnership of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good (University of Minnesota).

In the context of Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), the 19<sup>th</sup> public university, situated at the Northeastern Peninsular Malaysia, the closest definition of civic education embraced could be the one defined by Duke University, which deems community engagement as a powerful civic learning experience: "As the classroom lessons of citizenship and leadership are applied and tested in real-world environments, students develop the means to use their minds and develop ethical commitments with maximum vigour (Duke University)". In Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, many programs related to community engagement have been organized since its establishment in 2007. Echoing one of the missions of the university, UMK views community work as a powerful opportunity to enrich students' experiential learning, in which theories and concepts acquired from class are put in practice; build capacity for civic responsibilities towards the society well-being; and ability to inculcate spirit of acknowledging cultural differences while working with others of different origins in making an impact to the world.

To promote and strengthen civic engagement among students in UMK, extra credit hours could be rewarded to students who offer community service for a specified number of hours throughout their undergraduate studies. A variety of service learning programs related to community service and developments are held by UMK, both in the local and international arena and students' volunteerism is expected. Volunteering is often discussed in connection to civic engagement because of the opportunities it affords individuals to participate in activities of common interest and to work toward common goals (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Crystal & DeBell, 2002; Hemingway, 1988, 1996; Putnam, 2000; Rojek, 2002; Van Til, 1988). Ultimately, these opportunities for active community participation are key to democratic citizenship (Hemingway, 1999; Rojek, 2002). There is some evidence suggesting that when civic engagement is cultivated in adolescents, their participation in civic activities such as volunteering may persist through adulthood (Smith, 1999; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997).

However, it remains a challenge to the coordinators and academic staff when programs, which call for voluntary participation, fail to attract students. Due to time constraint and in view of the need to effectively utilise resources invested for the service activities, mandatory community service such as compelling students to perform community work, thus inevitably, is resorted to. UMK is aware that such mandatory mode of participation may cause resentment, potentially eroding the possible benefits of civic participation (Waburton & Smith, 2003). While debate continues about the advantages and disadvantages of mandating community service, the practice of compelling adolescents to participate in community service is increasingly common.

It is therefore the intention of this paper to gauge civic behaviours, opinions, knowledge and dispositions of undergraduate students through their participation in a community-based intercultural leadership program in Vietnam. Pivoted by the theme of multicultural teamwork and social entrepreneurship, Social Enterprise for Economic Development (SEED) is a community-based, intercultural leadership and enterprise development programme which exposes students from different universities in Europe and Asia to the unique contexts of villages where poor community resides. This program is co-organized by the Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) and the Asia Research Centre (ARC) at the Chair for International Management (South East Asia), University of St. Gallen (HSG), in collaboration with the ASEAN Learning Network.

Based on selfless and socioeconomic orientations, this programme leveraged on the entrepreneurial principles and knowledge of students so as to design and suggest feasible business development plans to village entrepreneurs. Such move not only brought about social changes in the villages but also walked students through the cross-cultural learning experience facilitated by participation of international students and academic staff from Switzerland, Brunei, Thailand, Germany, Singapore and Vietnam. UMK officiated its inaugural SEED programme from 21 July – 3 Aug 2010. Sri Tujuh, Tumpat, one of the provinces identified as having limited social and economic development, was selected to be the village site for SEED-UMK. Village entrepreneurs hosted this program include baker of akok (local desert), manufacturer of batik (wax-and-dye fabric), noni juice, livestock farmers (goat and chicken), catfish, cultivators of mushroom and chillies. To ensure village enterprise sustainability, SEED follow-up was executed from 12 – 26 July 2011.

Having implemented two series of SEED successfully in Pantai Sri Tujuh, Tumpat, Kelantan, three students of Universiti Malaysia Kelantan were given the opportunity to experience similar program held in Tan Lap Village, Vietnam. During the SEED programme, participants were invited to study and examine the small-scale businesses managed by village entrepreneurs for a week before suggesting ways of improving their business and financial status. These participants worked in teams, probed into the problems faced by the village entrepreneurs, actively engaged them in discussion and formulated viable business plans. They presented the business proposals to villagers for further feedback before attempting to source various financial aids from multiple business and financial support agencies. Five village entrepreneurs who were selected to host the program in Tan Lap Village are cultivators of pepper, cashewnut, mushroom, frog and fish.

The purpose of this article is not to advocate specific public policies, but rather to examine the condition of civic life undertaken by SEED participants while staying in the village, and to ascertain the civic beliefs and knowledge among the undergraduates, whose attitudes and behaviours may help us predict their willingness in getting involved with community service in future, throughout their adulthood. This paper contends that civic decline cannot be simply attributed a lack of or decline in civic knowledge. However, we content that civic knowledge and the success of civic education are dependent on civic competence, character and conduct of participants in any community service program. Thus, taking SEED participants as the units of analysis, the research objectives include:

- Examining participants' civic behaviours, competence for civic action, civic accountability, perception on social injustice, and values they believe in;
- Determining whether participants are personally responsible, justice oriented and participatory citizen;
- Ascertaining quality of experience gained from the service learning program and intent to participate in future.
- Assessing factors influencing civic engagement among the respondents, particularly in SEED program.

### ***Methodology***

A team of 39 undergraduates and academic staff from Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, the Phillipines, Switzerland were involved in SEED Ho Chi Minh. These participants were invited to complete a self-administered questionnaire, consisting of close-ended questions. Except for demographic data, all items are measured on five Likert scale. For the first objective, to explore young people's civic behaviours and level of civic engagement, we asked them to self-report on their ability to engage in a range of civic-minded activities. The measures developed in this study assess young people's perceived ability to engage in civic action (e.g., organize a meeting), express their concerns to local authorities and experts who can help address the social problem. Measurements on competence for civic action and civic accountability were adapted from California Civic Index (Kahne, Middaugh, & Schutjer-Mance, 2005). Perceptions on social injustice were drawn from the Belief in America as a Just Society measure in Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, in press.]. Besides, values play an important role as standards for personal behaviour.

An exhaustive set of values would not be relevant as indicators of civic engagement thus we relied on a limited set of values suggested by Flanagan, Syvertsen, and Stout (2007). Specifically, we asked respondents to indicate the amount of importance they place on religion, improving race relations, helping others, protecting the environment, civic participation, and secure employment. In addressing the second objective, we referred to the study by Westheimer and Kahne (2002). They lay out a conceptual framework for three ways of framing the concept of a "good citizen": personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented. They differentiate these aspects of citizenship using a simple food bank analogy where individuals high in personal responsibility donate items to the food bank, those high in participation organize the food drive, and those with more of a justice-bent raise questions about why people are going hungry and seek to redress the root causes of poverty. Building on their work, Flanagan, Syvertsen, and Stout (2007) created constructs to measure these three aspects of citizenship which we used in this study. Eleven items were designed to assess participants' opinions, feelings and experience gained from SEED program and five items were used to examine their intent to participate in future. Data was analysed using PASW Statistics 18.0. Reliability test, descriptive and correlation analysis were run to interpret the findings.

### Findings and Discussion

A total of 15 respondents participated in this study, representing 37.5% response rate. These respondents are within the age range of 20 to 24 years old. Two respondents are Malaysians and the rests are Vietnamese. Majority of them are pursuing Finance study and the rests major in business administration, English, science. All respondents, except for one, took part in SEED for the first time. Table 1.1 shows the average mean score indicated by respondents on their competence for civic action, civic accountability, perceptions on social injustice and values they place on religion, improve race relations, helping others, protecting the environment, civic participation and secure employment. Mean scores were also computed on respondents' positive perception towards the service learning program which include feelings, thoughts and experience gained, as well as their intent to participate in the same program in the future.

Table 1.1 Mean Score on Competence for Civic Action, Civic Accountability, Perceptions on Social injustice and Values: n = 15

Construct	Mean Score
Competence for Civic Action	3.61
Civic Accountability	4.42
Perceptions on Social injustice	3.91
Values	4.46
Personally Responsible Citizen	4.44
Justice-oriented and Participatory Citizen	4.14
SEED experience	4.46
Intent to participate	4.27

Overall, Table 1.1 reflects positive feedback from respondents over the major constructs used in this study. Significantly, although these youth are at the age range of less than 25 years, they hold themselves accountable for the many civic actions and participation expected of them. Majority of them agree on statements such as 'If I love my country, I should notice its problems and work to correct them', 'I care about my country and I want to improve it', and 'being actively involved in community issues is my responsibility'. As for perceptions over social injustice, many respondents voiced their concern over these statements: 'It makes me angry when I think about the conditions some people have to live in', 'When I think about the hard times some people are going through, I wonder what's wrong with the society', and 'I get mad when I hear about people being treated unjustly'.

Similarly, values perceived by respondents on the amount of importance they place on religion, improving race relations, helping others, protecting the environment, civic participation, and secure employment are relatively high with mean scores recorded in the range of 3.01 to 4.87. Specifically, respondents view 'earth preservation for future generations' as highly important; this is followed by 'the need to do something to stop pollution' and 'the need to stop prejudice'. Also, referring to the mean as high as 4.44 and 4.14, participants in SEED program could be seen as highly responsible citizens who are justice oriented and favour participation in service learning program. Most importantly, respondents' feelings and thoughts over experience gained in this service learning program are positive where they concluded SEED as a meaningful, exciting and educational program (mean = 4.46) which should be implemented every year. Based on such encouraging feedback, these respondents have high intention to participate in SEED (mean = 4.27) in near future and they would also encourage the others to join.

Since the set of civic measures with good psychometric properties used in this study appear to be appropriate for use in examining youth civic participation in SEED program, we attempted to examine the relationship among factors influencing civic engagement with the experience accumulated for such service learning program and their intent to participate. The hypothesis posited for the final objective of the study is 'Competence for civic action, civic accountability, perceptions on social injustice and values held by respondents significantly influence their perception on quality of experience gained from SEED and their intent to participate in future'. Reliability test was run to determine the internal consistency of each construct. Table 1.2 shows each of the construct reporting acceptable reliability, i.e. alpha coefficient exceeding 0.50 (George and Mallery, 2003) and some beyond 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

**Table 1.2 Cronbach Alpha for the Major Constructs**

Construct	Cronbach Alpha
Competence for Civic Action	0.72
Civic Accountability	0.76
Perceptions on Social injustice	0.60
Values	0.81
SEED experience	0.57
Intent to participate	0.74

Based on the acceptable Cronbach alpha, we proceeded with running correlation test to decide whether to reject or not to reject the formulated hypothesis. Table 1.3 shows that two major constructs which influence respondents' quality of SEED experience and level of civic engagement are 'competence for civic action' and 'perceptions for social injustice', with p-value recorded less than 0.05 and 0.01. Civic accountability and values perceived were found to have no significant relationship with service learning experience. Interestingly, 'perceptions on social injustice' and 'quality of experience' gained for SEED significantly influence respondents' intent to participate in future. Thus, the hypothesis could be partially supported.

**Table 1.3 Correlation Analysis**

		1	2	3	4	5
1. Competence for Civic Action	Pearson Correlation	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
2. Civic Accountability	Pearson Correlation	.215				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.442				
3. Perceptions for Social injustice	Pearson Correlation	.350	-.268			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.201	.335			
4. Values	Pearson Correlation	.065	-.010	.474		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.819	.971	.075		
5. SEED experience	Pearson Correlation	<b>0.55*</b>	.038	<b>0.70**</b>	.217	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.032	.892	.003	.436	
6. Intent to Participate	Pearson Correlation	.510	.184	<b>0.59*</b>	.281	<b>0.67**</b>
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.052	.511	.020	.310	.006

\* Correlation is significant at 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\* Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

### Conclusion

Findings shown in the study reflect indirectly the success of SEED program held in Ho Chi Minh where majority of respondents have positive feelings and thoughts over the experience gained from this service learning program. Based on the mean scores indicated by respondents, the study affirms a set of civic measures that are appropriate for use with youth participants in community service so as to promote civic education and inculcate civic engagement as lifelong practice. With such limited size of sample,  $n = 15$ , it is hard to generalize. However, it is fair to say that SEED program, a landmark community-based service learning program has been successfully implanted the spirit of civic engagement among the participants, connecting their knowledge in classroom to real-life practice in social living laboratory which takes place at the village.

As universities develop measures for their students' civic development, it will be important to determine what factors have the most impact? Is curricular engagement key? Is preparation and reflection for co-curricular service just as powerful? How does a campus develop and maintain a "culture" of civic engagement among its students? (Hollander, 2001). This study is initiated to address part of the questions stated above. Although there has long been a scholarly consensus that classroom civic education has no effect on civic knowledge, it can be suggested that formal education may well hold the key to the erosion of civic life that troubles so many thoughtful people. Structured and well-implemented service learning program giving rise to quality of serious leisure experience to these youth would definitely encourage more participation and most importantly, induce civic engagement as lifelong practice which may persist through the adulthood.

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