

# **A Study of College Graduates' Equanimity, Commitment to Service, and Understanding of Themselves as Civic-minded Professionals**

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Quantitative, survey-based research with a national sample of 450 alumni of 24 colleges, ages 21–40, of the Bonner Foundation's intensive co-curricular service-learning scholarship program measured civic engagement during college, perceived qualities of service and learning experiences, and dependent variables (i.e., career motivations, life satisfaction, and an equanimity scale).

**PROBLEM:** This study is framed by the assumption that higher education has a responsibility to prepare graduates to be actively engaged citizens and professionals (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003; Daloz, Keen, Keen & Parks, 1996; AAC&U, 2007). However, there is little empirical evidence as to the types or the nature of college experiences that might lead to lasting engagement (Hatcher, 2008). Sustained civic responsibility may require equanimity, but little is understood about its development. Astin & Keen (2006) argued that "it is the peace and calm that is typically associated with equanimity that allows the person to channel anger or frustration into positive action" (pg. 3).

**RELEVANT LITERATURE:** A small study of alumni of a 1600-hour, co-curricular service learning program found 100% were still doing service 6 years later (Keen & Hall, 2008). A larger study found outcomes associated with involvement in service during college were present five years after graduation, but waned ten years after graduation (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2005). The study's survey questions are framed by theories of identity development during the young adult years and learning partnerships (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004), professional development (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006), motivations for participating in service (Morton, 1995), civic-mindedness (Hatcher, 2008; Hatcher & Steinberg (2007), and reflection (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Astin, Astin, and Lindholm's research on equanimity in college found that "undergraduates show significant growth in their capacity for Equanimity during the college years, and practices such as meditation and self-reflection can contribute to that growth. Equanimity has positive effects on a wide range of other college student behaviors, abilities, and feelings: grade point average, leadership skills, sense of psychological well-being, ability to get along with other races and cultures, and satisfaction with college." (<http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/findings/spiritual-measures/equanimity.php>)

**RESEARCH QUESTION:**What patterns of civic engagement and types of service and learning experiences during college and post-graduation contribute to graduates' commitment to civic involvement and career choices, life satisfaction, and equanimity.

**DATA COLLECTION:** Data is being collected through online survey. The purposive sample included about 3000 of the 4000 alumni of a co-curricular college service-learning program, ages 21-40. Alumni are still being contacted. Responses have been received from 767 alumni, but the formatting of the online survey discouraged full responses were only made by 458 alumni. (We fear that alumni completed the survey on iPhones and the questions' response boxes were too large for the screen.)

The alumni are evenly distributed across the 20 years. Women represented 71% of the respondents and 78% were white, 11% African-American. 46% had received MS or MAs and 17% had terminal degrees, with many planning for a terminal degree.

**FINDINGS:**

- **Many had done a year of service:** 10% had done a year of service with a faith based group, 8% with AmeriCorps, and 2% with Teach for America.
- **A remarkable 31% work in the government sector and 34% in the nonprofit sector.** The largest employment group is teachers (24%). 90% voted in the last Nov. election. 78% had volunteered in the last 12 months.
- **Half of them had attended in the last year a public meeting** in which there was discussion of community affairs and worked with others to fix or improve their neighborhood.

- **Aspects of college that most contributed to their professional identity and career goals** were academic coursework, long term service, work in the community, and internships. Reflection experiences in college were mostly likely to help them clarify personal values and understand diverse perspectives, from a list of 10 outcomes.
- **The alumni often frequently experienced equanimity**, as measured by the six questions that make up the equanimity scale (Astin, Astin & Lindholm, 2010). On a 7 pt. scale, the following percentages reported that “During the past year how frequently have you experienced each of the following:” (6 and 7 on a 7 point scale)
  - 61% Been able to find meaning in times of hardship
  - 47% Felt at peace/centered
  - How well does each of the following describe you?
  - 78% Being thankful for all that has happened to me
  - 64% Seeing each day, good or bad, as a gift
  - 63% Feeling good about the direction in which my life is headed
  - 55% Feeling a strong connection with all of humanity

Equanimity among the alumni was strongly correlated with questions about professional identity, using stepwise regression analysis, including “I feel a strong sense of connectedness to others, even if they are quite different from me” ( $R=.55$ ), satisfaction with career ( $R=.55$ ), “I often feel a deep sense of purpose in the work that I do” ( $R=.45$ ), “since college, meditation has been valuable in sharing current goals and professional identity ( $R=.40$ ), faith community has been valuable ( $R=.40$ ). Pearson R correlations between .40 and .44 were found between the equanimity variables and each of six life satisfaction questions and with the extent to which their work allowed them to make a difference in the community and to work to correct social and economic inequalities.

When the six individual measures of the equanimity scale were correlated with other variables from the survey, only a few of the life satisfaction variables evidenced Pearson Rs at a modest to strong level (.4–.45). “Felt at peace/centered” correlated with

four questions about satisfaction: leisure activities, religious or spiritual life, close relationships with family and friends, and volunteer activities. These findings will be compared in the future to results from similar questions on the national AmeriCorps longitudinal survey.

Experiences that alumni had experienced since college that helped shape their career and professional identity that correlated with variables in the equanimity scale ( $R=.30-37$ ) included meditation, faith community and mentoring others. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2010) similarly found that the equanimity scale correlated best with meditation and reflection activities in college.

Little relationship existed between equanimity and reflection activities in college, nor life satisfaction and reflection activities in college.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE:** This research will contribute to identifying what types of educational strategies contribute to college graduates' understanding of themselves as civic-minded professionals and the equanimity they may need to sustain commitments. The proposed research project will shift the focus of existing research beyond volunteering and political engagement to include an emphasis on the civic dimensions of their career, civically minded professional identity, and personal equanimity. The findings may support recommendations to improve undergraduate and graduate education toward those ends. The findings also point to the importance of close relationships with family and friends as well as satisfaction with one's career in gaining a sense of equanimity.

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