

Community Attachment, Social Capital and Older Volunteers: Building Multigenerational Bridges through Voluntary Action

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Abstract

This paper describes three demonstration projects in the US and EU that view the aging population as a natural resource to be tapped for community problem solving. The programs attract skilled volunteers through opportunities for life-long learning and social networking. Volunteers are competitively chosen through employee interviews and participate in 50 hours of training on community issues and topic-specific skills development. Longitudinal panel studies of 3000+ multigenerational volunteers in 5 countries track changes in health, civic activities, volunteerism, successful service provision, satisfaction and organizational change. Evaluations report significantly increased civic activity among volunteers. After 2-3 years of voluntary activity in the demonstration projects, large majorities (91-94%) of volunteers remain active in their communities for the six-year followup process. In most cases those who are no longer involved actively in their communities at followup have developed disabling health conditions. Bridging (and sometimes bonding) relationships between the participant team members are identified and maintained over the six-year period.

Introduction

Although a large Baby boomer cohort born 1946-1964 represents a potential drain on social and health service provision, the educational and professional skills achieved by this cohort represent a capacity for them to serve as problem solvers and leaders. Instead of viewing approaching retirement as a time of rest and retrospective focus on past accomplishments, current wisdom emphasizes continuing productivity, new careers and/or social and community involvement. This emphasis on the resource capacity that older individuals represent for their communities looks both at “bonding” social capital and “bridging” social capital. Bonding social capital addresses the issues of the individual networks of the older persons, but bridging social capital refers to the potential linkages to other networks and organizations that boomers represent for their communities.

Capitalizing on the integrating networks of talented and experienced older volunteers may create community linkage and networks that can mitigate *against* negative community outcomes and *for* positive and peaceful initiatives (Putnam, 2000; Sander & Putnam, 2006). This paper describes two national (US) and one international (EU) demonstration projects that benefit from a state-of-the-art, panel study evaluation of individual, community and service recipient outcomes. The primary measures for this paper center on the bonding and bridging social capital opportunities realized by program participants and the translation of those networks and community attachments into the “staying power” of activities and community participation behaviors beyond the life of the program.

Social Capital

In *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993) and *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam builds on the initial wave of social capital research by examining trends in civic engagement and underscoring the benefits associated with the development of social capital. Putnam, echoing his predecessors, contends that democracies work best when their citizens form bonds linking themselves to the forward progress of society as a whole. His assertions about social capital found a willing and attentive audience in the U.S. at a time when: 1) participation in neighborhood organizations, recreational and leisure clubs, and fraternal associations was steadily declining, 2) voter turnout was dwindling, and 3) disillusionment with the political process was growing. In response to those trends, *Bowling Alone* seems to offer a fairly straightforward message: Find ways to link people to their neighbors, and those linkages will strengthen not only the local community but also the broader underpinnings of American democracy.

Several scholars and even political pundits have challenged Putnam's approach to social capital. One such line of attack has been aimed at his use of aggregated data. His analyses focus on city, county, or other aggregate levels. Perhaps the response to calls for additional research on trust and social capital lies in a shift away from Putnam's focus on aggregate-level data and toward individual-level data. This paper builds on these lessons by focusing attention at the individual level of analysis. The analysis centers on participants in the Legacy initiatives to measure if participation generated social capital and civic engagement, as well as how long any gains survived after completion of their time in the programs. Finding such effects provides additional support for the success of the Legacy model and is another argument for its expansion as a tool for bringing the talents of aging individuals to bear on the challenge the aging population will create for the nation and world. Bridging over generational divides will be important as costs rise for caring for elderly in coming decades and nations face collective action challenges regarding resource allocation decisions.

Legacy Corps, Legacy Leadership and EU's LACE

In the US, Legacy Corps for Health and Independent Living (N=2100) and Legacy Leadership Institutes (N=531) address developing programs that attract skilled volunteers while modifying organizational structures to attract and maintain the capacity these volunteers represent. Training is organized around themes such as respite care, public policy development, environmental planning, nonprofit fund raising, community development, disaster management and project specific goals selected by sponsoring organizations. In the EU, the Lifelong Learning and Civic Engagement (LACE) project has studied best-practice models in Holland, Germany and Belgium as well as the US Legacy projects, and has supported the implementation of these innovations in Ireland, Italy, Slovenia and Spain.

Table 1: Legacy and LACE Initiatives

Demonstration Project	Primary Funder	Hours Required/Year	Stipend	Major Voluntary Effort
US Legacy Initiatives				
Health and Independent Living (LCHIL)	AmeriCorps	450/year 3 years maximum*	yes	Respite Care
Legacy Leadership Institutes (LLI)	UPS, Pulte Del Webb, various state, federal and for profit entities	200-400/year, No limit on years service	no	Various projects to meet unmet community needs
EU LACE Initiative	EU, Socrates Fund	100-200/year, No limit on service years	no	Community projects

Legacy Corps participants receive training to develop new skills (60-90 hours) in a curriculum that provides information on respite care issues as well as other civic engagement, long-term care, and aging topics. Legacy Corps requires 400 hours of direct service in addition to the training time. Throughout the year, sites hold reflection sessions that bring the groups together for both learning and social purposes. Project directors assign individuals or teams to one or two clients at a time with whom they continue to work throughout their contract. Individuals may choose to continue for second and third contract years. Legacy Leadership Institute and the EU LACE members participate in similar long-term commitments to training and service in a variety of projects designed to address local problems chosen by the hosting organization or community.

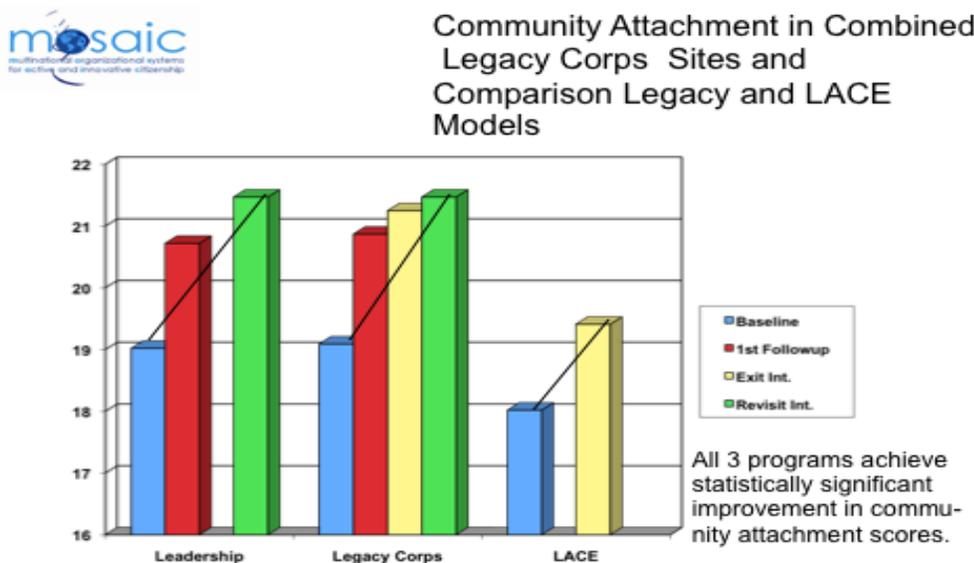
US participants have served as policy interns for state legislators, assisted in developing fund raising campaigns and strategies, focused on environmental strategies for the Chesapeake Bay area, provided health education through humor to elementary schools, assisted developing ex-urban communities in designing their social service infrastructure, supported United Way organizations in positioning organizations to enter the philanthropic network and provided aid to Habitat for Humanity offices devastated by the wreckage of two major hurricanes along the Gulf Coast. European participants complete service projects selected by their hosting organizations or communities. These participants also receive similar training and provide service for one or more years to their host organization. However, no living expense or educational award is associated with these programs.

The goal of the life-long learning component of Legacy training is to produce graduates who continue to volunteer in the same or another community agency or who use their new skills to obtain full- or part-time paid work. In addition, the evaluation team tracked the following measures as positive outcomes from the training and field experience: other types of civic engagement activity, continued involvement in lifelong learning, and continued involvement in caregiving as a vital form of coproduction for society. The research team used a common evaluation model to measure the success of all three demonstration projects. The team tracked more than 2600 older US volunteers, some for up to six years, to determine how the experience influenced bridging and bonding relationships (social capital), civic engagement activities, life satisfaction, health status, as well as changes in organizations and communities. In the US models, the team also followed service recipients longitudinally. In the EU project, more than 30 participants in Germany, 60 in Ireland, and an additional 50 in Slovenia, Spain and Italy have participated in launching a European model similar to the Legacy approach though tracking for them has only recently begun.

Results

A few common measures were selected as the focus for this paper that center on changes in community attachment since the literature has established a linkage between higher levels of attachment to one’s community and longer term commitment to voluntary activities. The team also included additional civic engagement/participation measures in all questionnaires, and for the EU group the team included several questions on social capital taken from the Eurobarometer instrument and World Values Surveys. Methodological, measurement, and management issues related to managing in ten states in the US and four test sites in Ireland, Italy, Slovenia and Spain were challenging. The foremost problem turned out to be the bureaucratic details and financial record keeping issues associated with funding sources rather than cultural differences or data collection issues. Despite cultural variations and research challenges, the outcomes of the project are compelling. Using the lifelong learning model and the development of meaningful activities that provide substantive help for NGOs, the level of civic engagement and networking increases dramatically over time and for years beyond the scope of the project involvement (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Based on a 25-point index of attachment built from five Likert type questions, both the Legacy initiatives (stipended and non-stipended) improve their community attachment scores during participation in the project and maintain those higher scores across a 5-6 year period. LACE participants follow a similar pattern from baseline to exit. Long-term follow-up has not been possible with the EU participants because longitudinal funding was not provided. In each program, involvement in the lifelong learning aspects of the program, in combination with meaningful work and new social networks, leads to a better understanding of their communities and increases understanding of what the community needs as well as simply feeling a part of their communities.

For up to six years after participating in a project, 94 percent of the Legacy Leadership Institute participants are still volunteering in as many as four different nonprofit venues. Ninety-one percent of the Legacy Corps participants continue to participate in voluntary or active aging activities. This type of retention exceeds the long-term involvement patterns identified in other studies. The CNCS and AARP recently published some of the most reliable data available on long-term participation (2007). Using the Current Population Surveys that can track up to two years of data, they found retention rates varying from 60-80 percent for a second year of service depending on the nature of the activity.

The potential for network building both within and across generations was offered in lifelong learning environments, service delivery activities and in scheduled reflection and social support settings. The attitude changes across generations were measured both quantitatively and through focus group meetings. The quantitative measures included a series of positive and negative adjectives along a seven-point continuum describing both younger and older people. The analysis at baseline showed some initial negative preconceptions about different age groups. The multigenerational teams do appear to have some significant impact on the few negative perceptions that abound at the beginning of the project. Younger participants initially reported more negative views of older people than the reverse, but by the end of the project, when statistical differences in perceptions are found, they are almost uniformly positive with one group more positive than the other group. Both groups viewed each other as more attractive by the end of the project, and younger participants saw older people as more active, more trusting and fairer than at the beginning of the project. The only negative attitude to emerge over the interaction was that older people saw the younger group as more impatient than patient after serving together.

New social bonding and bridging relationships were forged among the participants. At the beginning of the project, 35 percent of the participants worked in teams where they had not met their work teammates previously, and another 36 percent knew them only slightly. Among those individuals, 91 percent reported they would work in a group or team project with their partners in new or continuing endeavors. More than three-fifths reported they would talk to their partners about personal issues away from work, and three-quarters reported they would attend social occasions with their partners outside of the work environment. The Legacy data also find that the combination of lifelong learning, meaningful service and the opportunity for building new social networks similarly impacts life satisfaction and health status of volunteers, and organizations report long-term improvement and systemic change. Follow-up interviews with the recipients of service provided by the various volunteer programs identify high levels of satisfaction. The caregivers who receive respite care from the volunteers in Legacy Corps describe the service as “life saving” and describe statistically significant reductions of stress and burden in their lives. In one Habitat for Humanity site, the experienced volunteers that helped reorganize offices after Hurricane Katrina improved the productivity of the office such that their average of building three houses a year was increased to 60 houses per year.

Conclusions

Although the findings on community attachment and the apparent positive potential of multigenerational strategies are compelling, groups or countries who wish to replicate a model such as Legacy or LACE should not expect a uniformly glowingly positive experience. Although all the sites indicated substantial improvement in community attachment and civic engagement scores, implementation of programs such as these does not always proceed without problems or barriers. One of the greatest problems faced in this set of demonstration projects is the necessity of finding on-going funding at higher levels of match each year. The EU awarded funding for two years with no possibility of extension. AmeriCorps renewed its funding cycle three times (en years) but has recently terminated the Legacy Corps funding. Alternative support is currently being sought. Nonetheless, the positive outcomes (that go far beyond the limits of this paper to discuss) are worth the effort of investing in lifelong learning programs that attract older volunteers and baby boomers to meaningful volunteer activities.

For many of the Legacy Leadership Institute sites, responsibility for continuation of the projects has been assumed by some of the initial participants in the programs. Many Institutes have continued for multiple sessions with the previous leaders performing the roles of recruitment and program sustainability. In Germany, a nonprofit organization was chartered to support the ongoing activities. In the Netherlands, a similar change in organizational support occurred with a shift to a new, free-standing nonprofit to support their activities. Another important observation from these three demonstration projects is that there is no one-size-fits-all policy to attract boomers and older adults into the voluntary sector. Most are motivated by similar goals and needs, but those recruited in the disadvantaged communities via the AmeriCorps model do rely on the small living expenses to defray the expenses of their participation. For the Leadership Institutes with no requirement to focus recruitment on disadvantaged communities, the lifelong learning and network building potential serve as adequate rewards, and the absence of a living allowance is not a barrier to their participation.

The talented volunteers that are attracted to these types of model both in the US and in Europe represent social capital for NGOs in meeting a wide variety of community needs. Attending to the issues of lifelong learning needs and building social networks through meaningful service will help to attract the natural and renewable resources of an aging population. Increasingly, in the recent economic upheaval in the United States, Legacy initiatives have also served the purpose of creating human capital as well as social capital with as many of 25 percent of the retired participants returning to some form of paid employment. The two US models and the European model all demonstrate successful initiatives that deserve further support and expansion. The goal is now to apply these findings to communities that experience contested space tensions such as Israel/Palestine, Bosnia/Serbia/Croatia. The shift from viewing older members of society as consumers of services to that of producers of bridges to new resources is a healthy and positive change both for developed and developing countries. The resources represented by an energetic and talented cohort of individuals cannot be wasted by acceptance of ill-informed and pejorative images of older volunteers.

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