

“To See How Far I Can Go”: Benefits of “Fun” in Encouraging Civic Engagement and Building Self-Efficacy among New York Community College Students

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Community Days, an innovative initiative to foster community service and civic engagement at the City University of New York’s new Guttman Community College, encourages students to perform volunteer work around the city. What makes the program unique are opportunities for students to take self-directed excursions and enjoy free resources in the city—activities not usually associated with service-learning. Including a component that the students identify as “Fun Day” in a program dedicated to volunteer service strengthens the program and increases the enthusiasm of the participants. This essay examines reflections completed by the students after participating in Community Days, considering their initial expectations and apprehensions, their experiences in unfamiliar environments, and the connections they draw between community service and “fun.” These reflections suggest that the two program components reinforce one another in building social capital. Independently navigating unfamiliar areas of the city challenges them and builds their sense of autonomy and control. Successfully completing new challenges, however simple—whether serving meals in a soup kitchen or riding the Staten Island Ferry—gives them an experience of earned success. Because Guttman allows the students agency to decide how (and ultimately if) they will participate, they take full possession of their accomplishments.

Keywords: community college, civic engagement, community service, self-efficacy, fun, social capital

Introduction

Two-year collegiate institutions have traditionally filled the role of providing high school graduates in need of remediation with an opportunity to earn terminal associate’s degrees. Recently, however, these so-called community colleges have become cost-effective links between high school and a bachelor’s degree, particularly since the economic downturn of 2008 (Winerip, 2012; Taylor, Fry, Wang, Dockterman, & Velasco, 2009). But whether or not students transfer to four-year schools after completing their associates degrees, these institutions have an obligation to prepare students “for an engaged life in a democracy—as well as one that offers them the opportunity to achieve a better life” (Lucey, 2002, para. 27). The goal of increasing social responsibility is best addressed in a “climate that nurtures in these students a strong ethic of civic engagement” (Lucey, 2002, para. 3). Performing community service as part of a group strengthens cooperation and builds understanding, tolerance, and empathy. Yet more than 75% of students responding to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement report never having participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014).

How to best foster a spirit of community engagement in college students is an open question. Seeking to address the urgency of this need, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement has called for “investing on a massive scale in higher education’s capacity to renew this nation’s social, intellectual, and civic capital” (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 2).

While heroic measures to strengthen social capital would undoubtedly be beneficial, there is also value in comparatively modest efforts to raise awareness of community needs and developing projects to address them. At Guttman Community College, the first new college in the City University of New York system in forty years, a student-driven community engagement initiative increases civic participation and exposes students to the importance of service in their communities. Called Community Days, the program is both simple and economical. Community Days consists of a pair of days to engage students in the community, one composed of a day of volunteering and the other composed of activities to help students explore and experience their community. What makes Community Days unique is its combination of service-learning and opportunities for excursions and field trips that seem to have no higher purpose than exposing young people to some of the enjoyable free and low-cost resources of New York City. However, the students themselves identify connections between service projects and “fun” outings that are mutually reinforcing. Time after time in reflections on these experiences, students demonstrate that they are becoming engaged in their communities, learning to navigate and take possession of their own city, and developing self-confidence. Moreover, activities that they understand as “fun” reward and reinforce the volunteer work they perform in traditional service projects. In the context of student choice, independent agency, and self-reflection, these activities give participants a sense of confidence in their own abilities and a sense of involvement in a wider community of citizens.

Student autonomy is increased because their activities are entirely free of direct faculty involvement. While the Guttman students participate in Community Days, the faculty is engaged in assessment activities. As a consequence, the choice of activities—and indeed the choice to participate—is entirely in the hands of the students. Moreover, since adults do not supervise these outings, they are less like school-sponsored field trips and more like student-initiated undertakings complete with potential hazards like missing connections or getting lost. Their success in navigating these situations gives the young people confidence to explore other areas of the city in the future.

Four days of the Guttman school year are set aside as Community Days, two scheduled during the fall and two during the spring. Participation is voluntary, although individual instructors use a combination of coaxing and minor penalties to encourage students to take part. Individual students experience Community Days differently: the degree of instructor prescription and student agency vary according to the decisions of the faculty, with some activities more participatory and others more presentational, some directed to volunteer service and others to the appreciation of unexplored attractions in the city. One student distinguished between these two kinds of activities by dubbing one “Community Day” and the other “Fun Day”—one day devoted to helping other people and one reserved for self-gratification.

Not surprisingly, many students find that volunteer service is more fun than expected. They enjoy the experience of making a difference; of giving back to their neighborhoods; of sharing their time and energy. They become aware of how much in their own lives they take for granted. They make personal connections with children from the shelter system, with patients in a hospital psychiatric unit, or with other volunteers at a food bank. “It’s amazing to see how the little things you do for someone can put such a big smile on their face and fill them with joy. This was definitely an experience I enjoyed and would do again on my own time,” reflected one student.

But the “Fun Day” is not without its benefits. Again and again, students completing reflections on their experiences report the sensation of being in an unfamiliar or foreign part of the city, a challenging, unwelcoming, or even hostile environment, and the satisfaction of mastering their fear of the unknown or successfully taking advantage of a civic resource. In many cases these situations might appear unthreatening and unexceptional to an adult, but for the students, many of whom start college hobbled with a sense of past underachievement, they represent challenges far outside their comfort zone. Through these activities the students discover a connectedness with both their fellow classmates and their larger community. By pursuing these excursions independent of faculty supervision, they recognize their growing maturity, and in the process they claim ownership of their own city. Further, because “Fun Day” requires student agency and fosters group interaction, it strengthens existing social networks and reinforces many of the more traditional volunteer experiences of “Community Day.”

Introducing elements of “fun or novelty” can have a big impact on learning (Stupans, Scutter, & Pearce, 2010, p. 360). Frequently high-tech solutions are the default approach for engaging student interest. The gamification of education has been heralded as a means to promote retention as students try to complete tasks or move up levels in a digital environment (Huang & Soman, 2013; Chen, Chao, Hsu, & Teng, 2013). But many other creative solutions involving the dramatization of complex concepts or the use of “everyday items . . . in a completely different context” also prove memorable and effective ways to make learning fun (Stupans, Scutter, & Pearce, 2010, p. 360). These experiences suggest strongly that “enjoyment—without technology—is not out of place within university students’ learning environments” (Stupans, Scutter, & Pearce, 2010, p. 365). Because they promote interaction with student peers, “[f]un activities reflect a variety of hands-on exercises and ways to promote social involvement among students” (Tews, Jackson, Ramsay, & Michel, 2015, p. 16). Incorporating an element of “fun” in Community Days suggests that there are benefits for making community service projects enjoyable as well as philanthropic.

Guttman Community College: An Innovative Approach

Guttman welcomed its first students in the fall of 2012. Among the nascent institution’s other innovations to increase student retention and hasten time to degree completion, Guttman has made a priority of community engagement. According to the college’s mission statement,

Community is at the center of Guttman Community College’s mission, and students are at the center of the College. Guttman fosters

an environment of cooperation and collaboration, where students, faculty and staff respect and appreciate each other’s perspectives, commonalities, differences and contributions. Students address compelling urban issues and move into the wider community through experiential learning and internships. Graduates will have the intellectual tools and confidence to be engaged citizens and responsible leaders (Guttman Community College, 2014).

The college takes this commitment to community seriously, making civic engagement and community service part of every student’s experience. “Civic Learning, Engagement and Social Responsibility” has been designated one of five institutional learning outcomes for the college.

The students considered here were all in their first year and were all members of one of five “houses”—learning communities of students who attend Guttman full-time and take all their classes together. Their instructional team of professors and counselors meets weekly to discuss their progress and to plan collaborative projects. A Student Success Advocate conducts a weekly session called LaBSS (Learning about Being a Successful Student) and meets with each individual student for “touch points” during the semester. Over the course of several meetings, the instructional team worked out plans for the Fall 2014 Community Days in this particular house.

In the house discussed in this article, there are 77 students in three classes. Almost all live in New York City—95% of Guttman students live in one of the five boroughs (Guttman Community College, 2013)—and graduated from public high schools. Many are the first in their families to attend college. They took part in a two-week summer bridge program in August followed immediately by the beginning of classes; by October 28 and 29, 2014, when they participated in Community Days, they were in their eleventh week at Guttman.

To provide structured opportunities for community service, Guttman collaborated with New York Cares, the city’s largest volunteer management organization. New York Cares annually helps match 62,000 volunteers with 1,300 nonprofits, city agencies and public schools (New York Cares, n.d.). Students registered with New York Cares during class time, attended an orientation session and then chose from a variety of service options including maintaining city parks, packing emergency food rations in boxes at a food bank, serving meals at a soup kitchen, and visiting a senior center. Depending on travel time to their work sites, they generally provided service for half a day.

For their other day of activities, students were invited to peruse a list of free events and attractions in New York City assembled by Community Days’ coordinator, an assistant professor of experiential education. At the top of the page appeared an invitation to ride the Staten Island Ferry followed by a list of free museums, free performances, and walking tours. Students could pursue these activities individually, but because the students at Guttman are quickly acclimated to a pattern of small group work, many of them took part in these excursions as part of a group.

To document their experiences, students were assigned the task of posting photos and writing short reflections on ePortfolio. All Guttman students have access to these digital portfolios where they upload course work and reflect on their progress.

The ePortfolio template includes a “Community Engagement” section, and students personalize their pages with customized backgrounds, images, and posts. Instructions for Community Days noted that activities would count toward each student’s participation credit. After Community Days, instructors reviewed each student’s portfolio and commented on their photos and reflections. Of the 77 students in the house, 35 (45%) took part in one or both Community Days and posted reflections on their activities. Photos and reflections revealed that additional students who took part in activities did not take the final step of uploading a paragraph to their ePortfolio.

The reflections and photographs posted on ePortfolio were used as a data set for this essay. The students’ choice of destinations and their decisions to pursue activities alone or in groups were recorded. Their expressions of initial apprehension about certain destinations, their enthusiasm when they successfully completed their excursions, and the connections they made between service activities and “fun” activities were explored. What is striking—and significant—is that this small sample yielded so much rich evidence of engagement, demonstrating the value of “fun” in developing social capital.

The Shape of “Fun Day” Activities

Riding the Staten Island Ferry was the most popular of the “Fun Day” activities. Nine students (26%) of the 35 writing reflections described the experience, and four others joined their classmates in photos but either did not mention the trip in their reflections or did not write reflections at all. Presumably the high incidence of participation in this activity had something to do with its appearing first in the list of possible expeditions. From many perspectives, this activity has less to recommend it than a trip to a museum or performance. A thoroughly prosaic form of public transportation, the ferry annually carries 22 million passengers—many of them weary commuters on their way to or from work—between the borough of Staten Island and lower Manhattan (New York City Department of Transportation, n.d.). The ferry has been free for all passengers since 1997 (Sontag, 1997).

For the Guttman students, however, only 1% of whom live on Staten Island, this trip was an adventure. Seeing Manhattan from the Upper New York Bay fired the imaginations of two ferry riders, who found themselves thinking about recent and more distant history:

As the ferry left the Whitehall terminal in Manhattan, the first thing that caught my attention was the Freedom Tower, looking at it brought back memories of the twin towers when they were still standing and [I] was amazed, amazed at all the hard work of constructing the tower and picturing how Ground Zero will look like after all the other buildings around the Freedom Tower is complete.

Another ventured still further in imaginative engagement with his surroundings:

As we kept moving further away from the city I saw how nice the background of New York and its image and how it looked. The Freedom Tower stood and I stared at the Freedom Tower and Statue of Liberty land of freedom home of the brave amazing views from my

city I would never exchange. I only imagined how hundreds of years ago the Island and views looked like coming from another country on a boat and as soon as you see the Statue of Liberty you know you are free and safe.

Other students anticipated a voyage fraught with potential thrills and danger. “It was my first time on a boat,” explained one student. “At first I got a little nervous because I’ve never been on any boat or ship and I just had these negative thoughts about it before I entered.” For two students, apprehension about boarding the ferry focused on the possibility of becoming seasick, and they were relieved to discover the motion of the vessel was steady and nearly imperceptible. Still another student, whose fears were stoked by motion pictures, worried that “Titanic [would be] the outcome of my experience.” This student described her completed round-trip ferry ride as a psychological accomplishment: “I decided to overcome all of the negative imagery I had in my head from watching movies like Titanic and explore the great waters. It was actually very cool, and sort of relaxing, while sitting inside it was nice and warm and you can feel the boat moving a little bit.” Only one student admitted he was disinclined to have a repetition of the ferry crossing: “Will I ever do it again? Nope, no, no, never ever again.”

If these fears of nausea—or outright maritime disaster—seem exaggerated, they were genuine for the students, and their pride in conquering their anxiety was unfeigned. Essentially, what many of these students described has been termed “experiences of earned success” (Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiania, 2012, p. 2). In these experiences, students confronted situations they expected to be difficult and triumphed. “Experiences of earned success appeared most salient to students when they were tied to previous negative experiences or areas of apprehension” (Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiania, 2012, p. 15). In an academic context, these successes productively challenge students’ negative self-perceptions, giving them confidence that they can be skillful learners. The Community Days activities demonstrate that these personal victories can take place outside the confines of the classroom. Comparing these achievements to what are called “outdoor and adventure education” opportunities like Outward Bound seems hyperbolic (Daniel, Bobilya, Kalisch, & McAvoy, 2014, p. 4), but for students with limited experience and circumscribed horizons, these experiences offer intimations of the same self-empowerment, and are considerably easier and more economical to arrange.

Students invoked a similar sense of accomplishment at other destinations. One student went to the Bronx Zoo, which she learned from the list of New York City attractions is free on Wednesdays. “I actually rode a camel, I was terribly horrified during the whole experience since I’ve never rode on any animal. No matter how terrified I was during the whole ride, it was great.” Another student elected an activity that did not appear on the list of free offerings but similarly engaged her sense of mastery: “I have never been snowboarding before I went to Belleayre for the first time it was stellar. It was so scary at first but then I fell tons of times but I got back up and tried it again and I finally got the hang of it[.] Going down the mountain felt like I was gliding on air surreal.”

A Wider Perspective

City students often present themselves as sophisticated, even hardened and wised-up. But many of them have little exposure to New York's distinctive tourist destinations, or areas of the city beyond the narrow confines of their own neighborhoods, the neighborhoods where they work, and the neighborhoods where they go to school. Their parents came of age in the 1980s or '90s when the city was considerably more dangerous (Eckholm, 2015). As a result, many of the students' parents are protective of their children. While middle-class suburban mothers and fathers are often stereotyped as smothering "helicopter parents," their working-class urban counterparts often share the perception that the world of the twenty-first century is a dangerous place (Rosin, 2014). The Guttman students are also young: in the fall of 2013, 76% were age 19 or under (Guttman Community College, 2013). Their hesitancy about actively exploring their city thus stems from a variety of causes. Some were rattled by the challenges of navigating the subway ("taking the 1 to Chambers St and transferring to the 2 train was a little hectic"), while others were frustrated by unexpected rules that they deemed capricious ("Everytime I tried to take a picture of the art piece, someone who worked there told me I was not allowed to take any pictures, and it was very disappointing because I really wanted to take pictures").

Students sometimes report hesitancy to visit unfamiliar places because they sense these venues are intended for elite consumers and do not welcome the uninitiated. Other students are apprehensive about entering a neighborhood they have heard is unsafe. While the students taking part in Community Days may have harbored these doubts, they did not express them directly. Rather, what they identified as intimidating was the simple unfamiliarity of these situations; they did not enjoy their lack of control over the surroundings. "I've never been to this part of the city (East Harlem)." "I went to the Botanical Gardens in the Bronx for the very first time." "I realized that I do not know everywhere in Prospect Park like I thought I did because I was lost for one whole hour." But feelings of uneasiness often yielded to the sense of enchantment: "The zoo felt and seemed like a foreign place during my visit." "It's the nature and the atmosphere that makes it feel like you're not in the Bronx anymore." "It being my first time in Queens I was impressed to how I got to see a different place I never got to travel." "I didn't even feel like I was in New York City anymore because I'm so used to the concrete jungle that it is really known for." Hesitation and doubt were replaced by optimism: "I really enjoyed my experience and would love to visit again." These positive experiences have been credited with cultivating optimistic expectations that foster effort and perseverance and finally achievement (Bandura, 1997).

Making the Unfamiliar Less Intimidating

Perhaps to forestall feeling entirely out of place, students employed several strategies to decrease their alienation and vulnerability. Some chose destinations they vaguely remembered from grade-school field trips, and reveled in accomplishing independently what they had experienced as part of a chaperoned group just a few years before. They also discovered their memories of these places were fallible. "The last

time I went to MoMA when I was in Fourth grade and it changed a lot. They have six floors, of architecture, sculptures, painting, and photography.” Or perhaps it was the students who had changed. These return visits served as measuring sticks revealing the students’ maturation and more sophisticated understanding:

The last time I went to the Bronx Zoo was approximately about three years ago and maybe it was because I arrived an hour before they were closing the zoo but there seemed to be less animals. Which in a way I was happy. Truth is as a kid I loved going to the zoo and aquarium but as I got older I realized how cruel it is to not only capture these animals but to also have them in small spaces which is nothing like the space they would have had in the wild. I love animals but I believe that they should be in the wildness where they belong, not trapped for our own amusement.

A second strategy that mitigated the sense of uncertainty many students expressed was to participate in an excursion as part of a group. The group context in which many of these activities were pursued allowed the more confident or adventurous students to set an example for their more timid classmates. “The ride was really fun going with the others and I felt this day brought us closer as friends... We all come from different backgrounds and I feel the boat ride is a great way to bring culture diversity to life.” As with the Staten Island Ferry ride, many found that the presence of friends or classmates at a cultural venue added to their enjoyment. Five students (14% of the 35 participants) visited the Museum of Modern Art, three of them for the first time. “I went to the museum with an old friend who also attends to CUNY school and thanks to our CUNY IDs our tickets were free,” noted one student. The companionship of a relative or friend made a new experience positive:

I did something fun in the city like go to the MoMa Museum! What an experience[.] I carried my sister along which now she participated in community days for the first time as well. All the art work; paintings, sculptures and the “cut outs” were quite interesting, this is the first time I ever been to this museum[.] everything was new to me. I never seen this kind of art work before, most of the paintings used a lot of colorful oils or paints. The sculptures used a lot of neutral colors to make a statement. I’m not much of a person who really enjoys paintings but this museum kind of changed that!

Several of the students capped off the social aspect of their day out by stopping for a snack: “As you can see we then went to treat ourselves to IHOP, it was a fun experience for me.” “To finish the day off I went to get Dip N Dots with my friends.”

Personal Growth: Taking Control

Some students made solitary excursions and had other epiphanies. These reflections in particular suggest perceptions of autonomy and control—what Albert Bandura has called “self-efficacy” (Bandura, 1997). One student visited the Museum of Modern Art:

I also passed through a room that was full of Picasso’s paintings,

it reminded me of junior year in high school when I had to learn about most of his famous drawings for a long time. So it was cool passing through paintings that I already have learned about. You can see how everyone was so into the different paintings of the museum by reading about them or just standing in front of them and staring at the drawing for a very long time. I also like how all rooms were white and made all the painting or sculpture just pop out, there were also about two rooms where it was just different colors from top to bottom and I stoop in the middle of room and it made me feel like I was in my own world...

A second student decided to visit the National Museum of the American Indian:

For the second day of community day I went to the National Museum of the American Indian, which can also be called George Gustav Heye Center. This museum is actually really close to my house, but surprisingly this is my first time visiting it. I always knew about this free museum, but I never thought about visiting it. Most people who live in New York City are always in a rush. Every weekday morning I am always on the rush to school. After school I am on the rush to travel back home. After I get home I am rushing to eat dinner, shower, and do homework. On the weekends I [am] on the rush to hang out with friends, go shopping or catch up with homework. The last thing I would think of doing is visit a museum. When this opportunity came along, I decided to visit this museum. On the way there I was rushing without realizing it. When I was on the bus, I stopped and thought to myself. Why I'm rushing? I got nothing to do after this, and I have the whole day to just visit the museum. Then it shocked me, it been so long since I took my time to do something. At that moment I decided to slow down my footsteps.

In both of these reflections the students express the sense of being in but not of a crowd. The first student perceived that to truly appreciate the works at the Museum of Modern Art she might try imitating the behavior she observed around her—stopping, standing still, and concentrating on what she was seeing. In this context, her statement “It made me feel like I was in my own world” indicates not isolation but her mastery of a setting that at first seemed intimidating. The second student observed herself rushing along with the urban herd and made a conscious decision to reject their behavior and the habits she had naturalized in herself. She too took control, choosing to reprioritize the way she spent her time. Because of their consideration of the individual in the context of the larger fabric of society, these reflections suggest progress toward what Marcia B. Baxter Magolda calls “self-authorship” (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

Making Service “Fun”

What is critical to understand is that “Community Day” and “Fun Day”—understood as distinct by many of the students—actually reinforce one another. Participating in these excursions as part of a group of classmates seemed to carry over

into students’ choice of volunteer service venues: They chose to go where others in their class were going. Knowing they would be volunteering with people they knew decreased their uneasiness: “I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw two students from my cohort whom were already working.” “My assumptions the first moment I went to volunteer in Prospect Park was that I saw some familiar faces so [in] my opinion it wasn’t going to be boring.” Others discovered that even when working with volunteers they did not know, they bonded over a common goal: “I had a great experience because I worked hard with other hard working people that I didn’t know but we got along.” They connected with networks of community service workers beyond their immediate acquaintance: “It was a fun experience, I meet a group of students from St Johns College in Queens and they were very nice.” Their success in overcoming the hurdles in volunteer work—figuring out where to go and how to get there, introducing themselves to volunteer coordinators who may have been harried or overwhelmed, completing work they expected to be routine or strenuous—clearly reassured them that their excursions would be similarly productive and agreeable.

Juxtaposing the service day with the “fun” day may have sweetened the Community Days experience—what the students interpreted as a reward for their generosity and civic spirit. Indeed, the fact that they considered these excursions self-gratifying “fun” rather than other-directed “service” may actually have played a role in overcoming student apathy or resistance. The “fun” factor was the sugar coating that persuaded the students to try something unfamiliar and even intimidating. What was actually “self-directed education,” in Peter Gray’s phrase, looked more like play than work or service (Gray, 2013). The self-administered reward also validated the very real contribution that the students made through their service activities: “Yes the job was hard and had an bad day but it was worth helping people that needed the help. So I am really happy for myself for going over and helped other people.” Even if they were only taking small steps, these freshmen were in the early stages of “developing the skills and capacities for self-reliant public action” (Boyte, 2008, para. 10).

Although field trips are easily dismissed as handmaidens to internships and fieldwork, they have been valorized as “short-term experiential education” (Scarce, 1997, p. 219). Particularly if they engage the students in activities of observation and reflection, they make learning more memorable and enjoyable. As a component of Community Days, the students’ excursions into the city were unrelated to any particular curriculum and had no connection to any particular academic discipline. Counterintuitively, this characteristic may have also worked to the students’ benefit. They chose the destinations where they went and the degree of unfamiliarity with which they felt comfortable. In their reflections they often scripted their own connections to past experiences and familiar locations. But in the process they learned to feel capable of negotiating the urban environment and to understand their place in it (Dardig, 2004). Urban historian Thomas C. Henthorn described the insights his mostly suburban, middle-class students gained from a place-based learning experience in which they participated at the University of Michigan-Flint. Their observations of the post-industrial landscape of the Rust Belt proved formative. His conclusion applies to the Guttman students as well: “. . .immersing students in cultures and social realities different from what they have experienced is key to developing not just an acceptance

of difference, but valuing it. This need to not simply acknowledge cultural diversity but recognize it as a strength of democratic society addresses the core of service-learning—justice, responsibility, and reciprocity” (Henthorn, 2014, p. 459).

Community service projects that cast service providers in a relationship of equals with the population being helped are preferable to volunteer programs that have the unintended effect of marginalizing and disempowering the objects of “charity” (Peterson, 2009). As Tessa Hicks Peterson writes, “The community must be seen and treated as an equal partner in the exchange of knowledge, service, time, and resources; each partner (students, community members, and professors) should be giving and receiving in different ways as they are able, creating a balanced sense of reciprocity” (Peterson, 2009, p. 548). The Community Days combination of volunteer work and pleasurable excursions gives the students several roles to play in a short period of time: service providers, observers, visitors in their own city. One student who spent “Fun Day” at the Bronx Zoo and “Community Day” spreading mulch in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park captured these different perspectives:

I think they ask for volunteers [because] they want to show ordinary people how they work hard to keep the park and environment clean and to peoples liking and they would take that into consideration to help do their part like not littering or damaging park property. I think thee [sic] Prospect Park Alliance exist to have a relationship between the Park and the people who frequently come to that park. I believe there is a need for this kind of organization because it’s just like city hall meeting with the citizens of the community who think their ideas can be beneficial to the community and it’s the same with volunteers and the park alliance, the people can give insight and advice to better the park from their point of view.

Building Social Capital

Volunteerism, community service, civic engagement—what has collectively been termed “social capital”—has declined precipitously in the years since the Second World War (Putnam, 2015; Putnam, 2000). Individuals’ networks of close friends and confidantes have been shrinking in the last thirty years according to some measurements (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006). The perception that society is increasingly fragmented, that individuals no longer see the attraction—or even the purpose—of working within larger groups to confront social problems has caused alarm. A growing withdrawal of participation in the political process among the poor and ill-educated because of the sense that their voices cannot be heard is ominous for democracy (Putnam, 2015).

The Community Days experience at Guttman suggests that small-scale initiatives that rely on student input and choice and that build on existing networks of friends and classmates—even in the context of “fun”—can have an effect out of proportion to the effort of developing them. The Community Days project, like a similarly low-cost strategy to boost retention by sending text messages reminding students when administrative deadlines are looming, similarly paid high dividends for a relatively

modest investment (Castleman & Page, forthcoming). These simple activities indeed plant seeds: months after Community Days, one student proposed to organize an outing over spring vacation, inviting both his Guttman classmates and his high school friends, and asked his instructor for museum recommendations.

The proportion of non-participating students among the 77 members of the house—55%—is admittedly high. Is it the inevitable price that must be paid for allowing students to exercise so much agency? Once service activities are made compulsory, they obviously cease to be “volunteer” work. While some degree of non-participation is no doubt unavoidable, it might be possible to draw upon the enthusiasm expressed by the students to refine the paradigm. The testimony of students who enjoyed both the service and social aspects of Community Days may inspire nonparticipants to take part in the future. Paying attention to the aspects of Community Days that students find most appealing, particularly the pleasure of accomplishing something worthwhile with a team of classmates or friends, ought to inform the way the program is shaped and presented in the future. Some faculty have considered introducing an element of competition within or among houses.

At the same time, the rate of participation is not the only measure of program success. The reflections posted by the students who took part in the pairing of “Community Day” and “Fun Day” provide evidence of what Alexander W. Astin posited in 1985: “*Students learn by becoming involved*”—with involvement described as the amount of physical and psychological energy students invest in the college experience (Astin, 1985, p. 133). Particularly for first-year college students, activities that encourage active participation and engagement prove more transformative and effective in the students’ growth than tweaks to subject matter and technique in teaching. The orientation of these Community Days experiences away from what faculty members are doing for student benefit to what students can experience and learn with minimal guidance speaks to what Astin says about the value of peers in education (Astin, 1985, p. 164). And as Baxter Magolda argues, the key to making service-learning contribute to self-authorship lies in making students “partners with educators, making their experience in these roles real” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 301). Their sense of empowerment in turn inspires students to feel their actions are indeed effective. As one student wrote about service to the community, “It brings people together, be united by diverse backgrounds to work for the common goals. It will make a difference. Every person counts!”

The students’ sense of self-efficacy and confidence shines through many of their reflections on Community Days. Strikingly different from the self-doubt many students express when entering community college, one Guttman student typified this spirit of optimism and possibility. He had followed the suggestion of a self-guided walking tour and photographed “a shot of street art on the Bowery that I took, not too far from the New Museum. An interesting piece,” he wrote, noting the slogan “Life is a trip.” He added, “For me it’s a trip to see how far I can go.”

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Notes

The author recognizes grammatical errors within the student quotations. The quotations were gleaned from short reflections provided in the students' ePortfolio and not from submitted papers.

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