

Bonner Foundation
Bonner Scholars Program Student Impact Research
Memorandum on Graduating Senior Survey (GSS), Spring 1999
Submitted October, 1999 by Jim and Cheryl Keen

Introduction

In 1997, we began a research process which aims at yielding a comprehensive portrait of the impact of the Bonner Scholars Program (BSP) on its student participants. This approach began by gathering interview data in the service of refining an omnibus student impact survey that had been previously piloted by the Foundation.

We reported on the findings of the omnibus survey in a presentation to the 1998 June gathering held at DePauw University and in a subsequently written report entitled, Evaluation of Responses by 929 Bonner Scholars to the BSP Student Impact Survey and Related Interviews and Focus Groups.

In that report, we recommended that the omnibus Student Impact Survey be replaced by a series of four surveys addressing particular groups of Bonner Scholars at critical points in their matriculation through the BSP. Since then we have embarked on the process of designing and administering the following four surveys:

1. An Incoming Student Survey (ISS) which seeks to clarify the profiles of incoming students on each campus, attending to demographic questions, past service experience, areas in which the BSP aims to engender growth, and the outlook and expectations students bring with them into the BSP. While such a survey does not directly measure the impact of the BSP on students, it will provide a very useful point of reference for measuring the growth of Bonner Scholars over the course of their years in the BSP. This survey was administered to the incoming students in the Fall of 1999 for the first time.
2. A Mid-Point Impact Survey (MPIS) will be administered to all continuing Bonner Scholars at the beginning of their junior year. This survey will gauge impact of the first two years of BSP participation while yielding a view of the BSP from those who are in the midst of their Bonner involvement. The first administration of this survey is scheduled for Fall of 2000.
3. The Graduating Student Impact Survey (GSIS) gathers data on the full four-year impact of the BSP. This survey focuses both on impact and introduces questions regarding outlook and plans beyond college. We believe that we will get from the seniors clearer information about the impact of the BSP on career plans, majors, scholarly interest and leadership activities. We anticipate that GSIS results, when compared to the results of the first two surveys, will yield clearer focus on areas related to intellectual development, such as the growth of systemic and critical thinking. The first administration of the graduating senior survey took place in Spring 1999.

4. A Bonner Alumni Survey (BAS) is also on the drawing board. In the context of the Bonner alumni gathering this coming June at Berry College, we will conduct a series of focus groups with alumni aimed at generating a set of questions grounded in alumni experience. To these questions will be added basic demographic questions as well as questions suggested by the Foundation. Our goal will be to have this Alumni Survey ready to be sent to all alumni in the network in the Fall of 2000.

For this memorandum, we have analyzed data from 252 Bonner scholars who responded to the Spring 1999 graduating senior survey. We had an 89.3% response rate, with 260 of the 291 Scholars responding, including Morehouse. (We were not able to include the late-arriving Morehouse data at this time.) While we hope to see a higher response rate in the future (our goal is at least 95%), it is noteworthy that this response rate compares favorably with that of 69.8% on the 1998 omnibus survey, which means that we have already closed the gap by two-thirds.

In general, the seniors' responses to this 1999 survey are very similar to responses to the 1999 omnibus survey. Our response rate is better this time and we should see some influence of the Bonner Foundation's renewed emphasis on the developmental nature of the BSP. For example, it is possible that these seniors were given more mature responsibility for program development and management, which may have had an effect on their response. We will be doing a close comparison of similar questions from senior responses on the 1999 Omnibus Survey and the 1999 spring Senior Survey in the next few weeks.

Rand Report Comparison

Our BSP results compare very favorably to the RAND report on the Learn and Serve grantees students. The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA has been asking the same questions for years about a student's values in relation to civic responsibility. This recent study was sponsored by the Corporation for National Service who contracted with RAND and UCLA to do a similar survey with participants of their Learn and Serve campus-based programs.

Since the 1960s, the data collected by the Higher Education Research Institute has found college students who highly value developing a meaningful philosophy of life to be on the decline. Yet here in 1999, this question got the strongest response of the set six civic responsibility questions we asked, demonstrating what a unique group the Bonner Scholars are. Moreover, this response is particularly notable because answers to this question show decreasing interest during the college years.

Also notably higher is the commitment to promote racial understanding, with 69.2% finding it is essential or very important. The RAND study found that participation in a semester of service increased all civic values or resulted in a smaller decline in comparison to non-participants. We find responses to these civic value questions typically 12 percentage points higher than RAND's one-semester servers and that only 31.6% of the students find being very well off financially to be an essential or very important value, despite the fact that most are in tight financial circumstances.

While we may feel that the BSP lags in its ability to influence commitment to engage the political system and advocate for policy changes, we should be pleased to note that our graduates feel stronger about this commitment than do Learn and Serve students who do one-semester of service.

Impact Data for GSS

The balance of this memorandum will review some interesting data emerging from the 1999 Graduating Senior Impact Survey.

- 253 graduating Bonner Scholars completed this survey, ranging from 5 to 23 completed surveys per campus.
 - ◇ 58.9% of respondents were female.
 - ◇ 41.1% were male.
- Along with the 6.7% non respondents on the question of ethnicity, 20.9% identified themselves as African-American /Black, 66.4% as Caucasian, 4.3% Asian-American, and 1.2% Hispanic.
- 64% identified themselves as religiously affiliated, 11.1% as non-affiliated and 20.6% as spiritual but not affiliated. 3.6% did not provide an answer. 4.3% indicated that their affiliation had changed during college.
- Almost everyone reports doing well academically. Only 2.4% report that they achieved a GPA of less than 2.5. 34.4% report GPAs between 3.3 and 3.6. 13% report GPAs above 3.7.
- Graduating senior Bonner Scholars report that their BSP participation has had a strong impact on the development of skills,
 - ◇ 95.4% on the skill of listening carefully to others.
 - ◇ 88.1% on skills of interpersonal communication
 - ◇ 86.1% on the skill of understanding a person of a difference background
 - ◇ 79.9% on the skill of helping groups overcome differences of opinion

And these outcomes are even more heartening when compared to studies of course-based service learning. (For example, in the FIPSE study by Eyler, Giles and Braxton, students reported no significant impact on communication skills.) Looking at the skill set outlined above from the viewpoint of civil discourse, one might make a case as well that Bonner Scholars make significant gains in core skills of citizenship.

- Furthermore, these substantial gains appear to come at little cost to academic pursuits. While we have heard occasional anecdotal complaints about negative impact of service hours on academic achievement, this doesn't appear to be a universal problem viewed in light of the following data: 20.2% of the graduating seniors say BSP participation has negatively affected their GPAs, 15.5% of graduating seniors say there has been a positive effect. 64.3% report feeling no effect in regard to GPA.

NOTE: Given the likelihood of some discrepancies between self-reported GPA data and institutionally-reported data, it would seem useful to confirm these data by asking each college to report composite Bonner Scholars' GPA's by class each year along with the composite GPA of the entire class.

- When asked to rate the relative importance of various aspects of college life, community service ranked with academic pursuits as the most important for graduating Bonner Scholars, above social life and extracurricular activities.
- Perhaps reflecting the dual ascendencies of service and academic pursuits, 76.9% of respondents wished that there had been greater connection between BSP service work and their academic pursuits.
- Also possibly reflecting the confluence of academic and service values, 81.4% of graduating Bonner Scholars plan to pursue a doctorate or advanced professional degree. This is more than twice the rate reported in the 1997 RAND study of participants (including all undergraduate levels) in service-learning courses, and higher still compared to national averages. On the other hand, only 28.9% were planning to start work on advanced degrees in the fall of 1999. While the reasons for this discrepancy are not yet clear, preliminary focus groups conducted with BSP alumni indicate that debt burden may play a significant role in postponement of graduate school aspirations for BSP graduates.
- Graduates plans for the first year after graduation include:
 - ◇ 41.5% full time employment on chosen career path
 - ◇ 28.9% graduate school (25.7% had already received their acceptances)
 - ◇ 15% employment outside preferred career path
 - ◇ 5.9% travel
 - ◇ 4.7% full or part-time service
 - ◇ 4% don't know
- The connection between BSP service and campus leadership that registered on last years omnibus survey looks even stronger (as might be expected) when looking selectively at graduating seniors. Almost three-quarters of Bonner Scholars (74.5%) reported holding campus leadership positions outside of the BSP. 8.12% of graduating seniors indicated that they have participated in other campus organizations. On future senior surveys we will consider asking those who indicate that they have not participated in other campus organizations to indicate responses, such as not interested, lived off campus, too busy earning money to pay for education, too busy earning money to support my family, and other.
- 98.4% expect to be at least somewhat active in community service following graduation, with 73.5% saying they would be active or very active (and 26.9% saying they would be very active). A less strong response came to the question about involvement in social justice issues after graduation, with 46.6% saying they would be active or very active (and 22.9% saying they would be very active). Only 9.9% said they would not be active at all in social justice issues after graduate school. More expect to be involved in social justice issues than BSP alumni activities, with:

- 18.2% saying they would “not” be at all active in alumni issues.
- 86.5% are positive or very positive about the BSP. 9.5% are neutral and 4% reporting a negative attitude toward the BSP.
- 49% said that their college significantly or very significantly provided structured opportunities to explore how their commitments related to their career choices, while 58.1% said the same of the BSP. Most (85.8%) took at least some advantage of their college career resources. Somewhat fewer (48.2%) said that the BSP helped them explore their career commitments, regardless of their connection with service. 52.6% said that the BSP helped them explore how to continue to act upon their career commitments after college while 58.5% said that the BSP helped them explore how to continue to act upon their service commitments after college. (In reporting on this question, we decided not to include answers indicating that the BSP somewhat helped them to explore these questions, because it seems it minimally should have done this.)
- If we are to ask ourselves to what extent the Bonner Foundation should be urging campus programs to provide career services, we may be interested to note that only 31.6% said that their service interests were the same as their career pursuits, with 41.9% indicating that they were somewhat similar. But 55.3% say they think the BSP needs to develop more transition programming to assist them with the transition from college life to work life. Giving credit to existing efforts, 80.4% feel at least reasonably prepared, only 2.4% say they are not prepared, and 62.1% say that the BSP helped with this transition. (Note: Mannons study of DePauw's Bonner Scholars found that they gained new insights about career choices and thought less about success.) Perhaps the need for appropriate counseling could be fulfilled through reflection on personal commitments, vocation, and the transition from college to career.
- Graduating senior Bonner Scholars indicated that the BSP positively affected their personal development in the following areas:

◇ sense that you can make a difference	89.7%
◇ appreciation of own relative good fortune in life	87.4%
◇ sense of compassion	87.3%
◇ sense that the world can change	79.2%
◇ sense of meaning and purpose for your life	77.1%
◇ allowed for work and travel experience that	
◇ deepened learning	75.9%
◇ understanding of political and social justice issues	73.1%
◇ ability to manage time better	71.9%
◇ provoked through about course material	61.3%
◇ increased self confidence as student	59.7%
◇ increased your participation in class discussions	47.1%

- The following percentages of students agreed that the BSP has provided them with the following:

- ◇ 90.5% opportunity to serve people from different different cultural, racial, ability, language or socioeconomic backgrounds
- ◇ 87.0 % understanding of community surrounding your college
- ◇ 86.2 % support for the initiation of new service projects
- ◇ 83.8% opportunity for exercising leadership
- ◇ 77.1% flexibility in the face of individual needs without sacrificing standards
- ◇ 77.1% support for involving students in program governance
- ◇ 76.6% support for involving students in program development
- ◇ 76.3% realistic minimum performance standards and enforced them
- ◇ 75.1% opportunity to work at service sites with staff from different cultural, racial, ability, language or socioeconomic backgrounds
- ◇ 72.7% opportunity within BSP meetings and retreats to gain new understanding across boundaries of culture, race, class and gender
- ◇ 69.5% opportunity to understand root causes of social justice issues
- ◇ 67.5% support at service site

- When asked to evaluate the importance of aspects of the college experience for them personally the following were identified as very important or most important at the following percentages:

- ◇ 98.8% studying and doing homework
- ◇ 98.4% community service within and outside BSP
- ◇ 89.8% social life
- ◇ 82.4% campus activities, clubs and groups
- ◇ 78.3% athletics or exercising
- ◇ 74.8% faith development and religious activities
- ◇ 67.5% on campus and off campus jobs (not BSP)
- ◇ 26.9% watching TV

- The following percentages of senior Bonner Scholars estimated they spent more than 16 hours per week on the following aspects of college life:

- ◇ 27.3% studying
- ◇ 21.3% on campus or off campus jobs
- ◇ 8.7% social life on campus
- ◇ 8.3% community service within and outside BSP

- The following percentages of senior Bonner Scholars estimated they spent 10-15 hours per week on the following aspects of college life:

- ◇ 54.6% studying
- ◇ 48.6% community service
- ◇ 33.3% work
- ◇ 23.3% watching TV (an alarming rate, compared to social life)
- ◇ 22.1% social life
- ◇ 6.7% faith development and religious activities (these are very important to scholars but it isn't reflected in the amount of time devoted)

NOTE: 37.5 % spent 3-5 hours a week talking with faculty and staff.

- When asked to indicate the importance of the aspects of the BSP, the graduating seniors identified the following as somewhat, very, or most important:

- ◇ 98.9% opportunity for community service
- ◇ 98.8% developing new skills
- ◇ 98.0% improving the community
- ◇ 97.2% personal satisfaction
- ◇ 97.2% opportunity to develop personal relationships through service
- ◇ 97.2% gain money to reduce loans while doing service
- ◇ 95.2% working with peers who are different from you
- ◇ 93.7% understanding root causes of human need
- ◇ 92.1% opportunity for organization participation and leadership development
- ◇ 91.3% career exploration
- ◇ 90.9% support system you find in the staff or fellow Bonner Scholars
- ◇ 86.3% academic exploration
- ◇ 83.4% opportunity for reflection and dialogue
- ◇ 82.6% enhancing your resume
- ◇ 75.8% opportunity to follow through on faith commitments.

- When asked to indicate how important different values were to them (drawing on the same questions that the Higher Education Research Institute survey has used for over 20 years), the following list ranks the values that were considered essential or very important;

- ◇ 70.8% developing a meaningful philosophy of life
- ◇ 69.2% helping to promote racial understanding
- ◇ 66.8% raising a family
- ◇ 63.2% influencing social values
- ◇ 44.3% influencing the political structure
- ◇ 31.6% being very well off financially

- Here is a ranking of the percent of students who indicated a value that is NOT important to them:

- ◇ 12.6% being very well off financially
- ◇ 8.7% influencing the political structure
- ◇ 7.1% raising a family
- ◇ 1.6% developing a meaningful philosophy of life
- ◇ 1.2% helping to promote racial understanding

- When asked how hopeful they are about the future, they indicate the following:

- ◇ 85% are hopeful about their future
- ◇ 43.5% are hopeful about the future of society
- ◇ 2% are fearful about their future
- ◇ 16.2% are fearful or very fearful about the future of the society.
- ◇ 12.6% are uncertain about their own future
- ◇ 39.5% are uncertain about the future of society.

Caveats

- In looking at this data, it is important to remember that surveys allow us to draw limited conclusions. Because they consist of self-reported information, and because we are not looking for internal inconsistencies in individual reports, we are unable to determine how authentically a student responded or ways in which the survey doesn't provide scope for him or her to report on the deeper meanings of the BSP experience. Our concern about this limitation is lessened because the questions on this survey have been shaped by in-depth focus groups with students on several campuses and because interpretation of the data will be informed by an ongoing program of focus groups and in-depth interviews which can capture dimensions that survey research may miss.
- The comparative analysis has picked up wide differences in campus responses on the GSS and the omnibus survey. The reasons for the variability in student responses will most likely be explainable in terms of the different campus cultures, staffing levels, BSP program training, service placement supports, family structures, and home communities that have/have not influenced the student in ways that are confluent with the BSP's developmental expectations. We hope to continue to explore the above developmental nuances in greater detail as we continue to grow our data sets and understand the BSP's impact on students.
- Some of our questions allow us to compare graduating Bonner Scholars to students surveyed in other survey efforts, such as by the Higher Education Research Institute. However, the bulk of our questions ask how the BSP affected Bonner Scholars in several dimensions. Most campus surveys just ask about attitudes, not how much one program or another affected them, and look for changes over time. Therefore we intend to look at our freshman survey carefully, and adjust the senior survey to pick up some of these changes apart from students' attributions about what affected them.

Conclusion

The research plan calls for the first formal report of data from the Graduating Student Impact Survey in the Fall of 2000, in the context of a comprehensive report due at that time. The comparison of two years responses will help us to gain a clearer picture as we begin to distinguish between response patterns that remain constant over several years and those which appear to reflect cohort differences and ephemeral issues in particular programs. We also look forward to the Fall of 2003 when the Foundation will be able to track the four-year impact on the student cohort which will have completed the ISS in the fall of 1999, the MPIS in the Fall of 2001, and the GSIS in the spring of 2003 as well as comparisons of five years of GSIS, four years of ISS data, and three years of MPIS data along with alumni data, all of which will be available at that point. Then, and from that point forward, it should be possible for the Foundation to gauge the impact of the Bonner Scholars Program as fully and substantially as survey research permits.