Researchers Diana Paolitto, Ed.D. and Louise Sawyer, J.D. at the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College recently reported their initial findings of their study of the impact of undergraduate experiential philanthropy courses on undergraduate women. These courses, which have grown in numbers nationally in the past five years, combine rigorous academic coursework with the practice of distributing thousands of dollars of grant funding to local communities. Both independent and corporate foundations support such courses by providing the funding for grantmaking. The researchers discussed their findings in a panel on “The Pedagogy of Philanthropy in Practice” at the 2010 annual conference of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration on September 30th.

The qualitative study was based primarily on a framework based in developmental psychology during the years of “Emerging Adulthood” (Jeffrey Arnett, 2000). The initial findings are summarized below and confirm that experiential philanthropy courses impact undergraduate women in their intellectual as well as psychosocial development in four domains of learning: intellectual development, perspective taking, self-efficacy, and values development. The research concluded that these four domains of learning are also important elements of the development of a young woman’s philanthropic attitude, identity and engagement and can therefore inform practitioners how to foster the growth in these areas. The pedagogical framework of the courses, particularly having actual money to distribute, leads to high levels of student engagement in the course, creating a catalyst for impact on both intellectual and personal development.

The study included in-depth pre- and post-course interviews and classroom observations, as well as an analysis of written coursework of 19 female and four male students in semester-long experiential philanthropy courses at three universities in the Northeast in the spring of 2010. The research was funded by the Sunshine Lady Foundation, which supports over 20 undergraduate experiential philanthropy courses across the country, as well as by the William J.J. Gordon Family Foundation.
First Finding: Impact of Experiential Philanthropy Courses on Undergraduate Women in Four Domains of Learning

The research confirms the impact of experiential philanthropy courses on undergraduate women in four distinct domains of learning:

- intellectual development
  (Higher order thinking beyond knowledge attainment)
- perspective taking
  (Awareness and use of multiple perspectives beyond one’s own)
- self-efficacy
  (Self-perception of one’s own capability)
- values development
  (Exploration and growing commitment to one’s own values system)

Second Finding: Four Steps of Philanthropic Development in Undergraduate Women

A second and unexpected finding was the identification of a sequential progression of four steps in the development of young women’s philanthropic attitude and identity. The first two steps show the emergence of a philanthropic mindset through exploration and experimentation. The latter two steps involve a commitment to and consolidation of philanthropic engagement.

The researchers emphasized that the steps are not fixed and rigid markers. Rather they are meant to be fluid descriptions of an ongoing process towards a young woman’s philanthropic identity which shapes her philanthropic beliefs and actions.

Step One: Fledgling Philanthropic Awareness
“Yearning to Do Good in the World”

A young woman at this step is characterized by her budding philanthropic awareness and nascent desire to “do good.” She is responding to or emulating external authority, and is in the process of clarifying, exploring, and sorting out her own values.

Step Two: Emerging Philanthropic Identity
“Finding My Voice”

A young woman at this step tests her values out on her peers; this is an intensely-focused interpersonal phase. This stage is characterized by the emergence of a tentative philanthropic belief system and identity. At this phase a young woman is testing out her philanthropic values through continued exploration of and deeper engagement with nonprofit organizations and activities. She is practicing hearing her own voice and beliefs in the presence of others, especially peers.
Step Three: Maturation of a Philanthropic Attitude and the Forging of Philanthropic Identity
“This Is My Cause”

A young woman at this step conducts an internal dialogue which explores and eventually proclaims, “This is me.” This step is characterized by a young woman’s clear commitment to and articulation of her philanthropic belief system. She shows a sustained involvement in targeted philanthropic goals and activities, including one’s coursework, commitment to one’s major and career path (internships, volunteer or paid job experiences). She clearly articulates her belief in the philanthropic endeavor she has chosen and explains her personal rationale for commitment and engagement.

Step Four: Self-authored and Integrated Philanthropic Attitude and Identity
“Values and Conviction in Action Sustained over Time”

A young woman at this last step has largely defined her belief system and internal identity, which integrates a philanthropic attitude and identity. She is committed to being engaged in philanthropic activities in her life for the long haul, whether it be through her career or personal activities, or both. She is confident in her philanthropic identity based on intrapersonal introspection and reflection. This step requires extensive time to develop completely, since it reflects the depth of “self-authorship,” described by Robert Kegan (1994) and Marcia Baxter Magdola (2001), as the capacity to define one’s own beliefs and identity internally.

Conclusions and Implications of the Research

1. Experiential philanthropy courses affect the development of undergraduate women across four domains, not only in intellectual growth alone. The impact on personal development (perspective-taking, self-efficacy and values) is significant because all four elements tap into the growth of the “flourishing person,” (Corey Keyes, 2000) which researchers have identified as critical during the college years.

2. Experiential philanthropy courses are particularly well-suited as catalysts for personal development, with the combination of intellectual content, reflection, and engagement in giving away actual money to real non-profits in local communities. The decision-making process with actual money leads to a high level of student engagement in the course.

3. An experiential philanthropy course will impact students differentially, according to where each student is in her development of a philanthropic attitude and identity upon entering the course. Educators, by employing a variety of strategies and learning opportunities that target the four domains of learning identified in this study, have the opportunity to help move students from one step to the next in their ongoing development of a philanthropic attitude and identity.

A full report on this research will be forthcoming.