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Are CompassionateHearts Scholars Compassionate? Smart? Confident?

Final Results from Cyrus Tang Foundation For Laying the Foundation for China's Civil Society



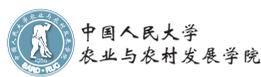
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Are CompassionateHearts Scholars Compassionate? Smart? Confident? Final Results from Cyrus Tang Foundation For Laying the Foundation for China's Civil Society

In the competitive world of China's education, Chinese students spend their days - and their evenings - studying and doing homework. Weekends are often devoted to extra tasks, from participating in the math Olympics to Chinese essay writing competitions. There is little time devoted to teaching students about civic responsibility. It is no wonder that some scholars and well-intentioned critics, including journalists, political leaders and even Communist Party members, question whether the creation of civil society in China has been sacrificed in the pursuit of economic growth. The Cyrus Tang Foundation has decided to do something about this.

In an innovative pilot program in Shaanxi Province, the CompassionateHearts Scholars Program, the Tang Foundation is working with its partners to create an environment in which middle and high school students can discover that community service is not a burden. It is not a drag on grades. Community service can be not only fun and rewarding, but is also a way to build self esteem, self confidence and a sense of social responsibility.

To implement their program, students in each of 592 junior high and high school classes in two counties in Shaanxi participate in a two-part program. The first part of the program is the election of the CompassionateHearts Scholar. The election process begins when the class nominates three of their classmates in an atmosphere of openness to become a Compassionate Hearts nominee. Students are only told the program's values (or criteria for selection) — devotion to parents, 孝顺父母; respect teachers and elders, 尊敬师长; care for others 关心他人; ready and happy to help 助人为乐; diligent and hardworking 刻苦勤俭; good grades 成绩优良. After a period of open discussion, students then vote for one and only one student from the list of three nominees through a secret ballot vote. The winner becomes the CompassionateHearts Scholar. In a typical school, there are about 30 CompassionateHeart students who become exclusive members of the CompassionateHearts club. Each junior high (high school) scholar is awarded with a 400 (800) yuan "scholarship."



592 students were elected by their peers to become Cyrus Tang Foundation CompassionateHearts Scholars. They were chosen based on 6 criteria:

- Devotion to parents
- Respect for teachers and elders
- Care for others
- Ready and happy to help
- Diligent and hardworking
- Good grades

The reward to the student, and to the student's community, goes far beyond the modest financial stipend. When the election is over, the second part of the program begins—the community service part of the program. A teacher, who is trained by program coordinators and supported by mentors from Xian Jiaotong University, Northwest University and other universities, organizes a number of community service activities during the year that the CompassionateHearts scholars perform. Wedged between busy school activities during the week and strategically scheduled on Saturday and Sunday mornings, the CompassionateHearts scholars learn the joys, challenges and rewards of giving back to their school and community. The students do many things—from beautifying their campuses to visiting old people's homes to volunteering in hospitals and in other community efforts.

Remaining Questions and REAP's Efforts to Provide Answers

The excitement of the Foundation leadership is contagious. When we tell people across China about this program, there is an almost uniform interest and desire to know more. And when people spend even a few moments with the directors and managing

directors of the Foundation, as well as the program coordinators and mentoring teams, their enthusiasm grows. There is a growing recognition that building a sense of responsibility among Chinese youth to community and discovering the joys, satisfaction and empowerment of community service can help turn China in a new direction.

However, to give this program a higher profile and greater credibility among educational officials and leaders at the regional and national level, we need to be able to answer some basic questions:

How does the program actually work?

How does it accomplish its goals?

Does community service detract from grades?

What is the impact of the program—on self esteem; self confidence and community responsibility?

In partnership with the Cyrus Tang Foundation, the Rural Education Action Project—better known by its acronym, REAP—is trying to answer these questions. In a year-long independent evaluation effort, a team of economists and educators designed a study to evaluate the CompassionateHearts Scholars Program. With personnel from both Stanford and some of the most influential and dedicated research centers in China—the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Tsinghua University and Northwest University, the ultimate goal of the evaluation is to answer the above questions and determine how Community Service can become part of the regular curriculum of all students and be done in a way that good grades and scholarships are not sacrificed, but rather that students grow both personally and in their academic lives.



Mei Yanan, 13, Siqun Middle School, Zhouzhi County, Shaanxi Province

"I am so happy and honored," exclaimed Mei Yanan, after the news that she was chosen to be a CompassionateHeart Scholar. Mei has always enjoyed helping classmates, be it with their homework "or just pouring them a cup of tea." Through the CompassionateHeart activities club, she and students chosen from other classes do good works, such as helping the elderly and cleaning public areas. Mei smiles and says, "Helping others makes me feel good."



How Is the Program Being Evaluated? Three Rounds of Surveys—Baseline, Post-Election and After Community Service

REAP's objective in conducting the evaluation is to understand: Which students are being nominated and elected for the program? If there is an impact of the program, what is underlying it? Does the election affect grades, self-esteem, self-confidence and social responsibility? Or, does the participation in the community service projects affect these outcome variables? We are especially interested in understanding if participating in community service projects means that students have less time to study and their grades suffer as a consequence.

To evaluate the program, REAP needed to collect high quality data. To do so, we sent field teams to Lantian and Zhouzhi counties. Our enumerators—all 30 of them who spent up to a month in Lantian and Zhouzhi counties—were from the Chinese Academy of Sciences; Tsinghua University; Northwest University and Xian Jiaotong University.

Our evaluation strategy was to collect information in three parts:

- Data Collection, Round I — before the program is begun for the year. This means we collected information about the students before the nomination of candidates/election of the CompassionateHearts Scholar and before the community service was performed. The enumerators collected information on a wide variety of indicators (or outcome variables) by asking students to take a number of tests, including:
 - Test of self esteem (how did they feel about themselves?)
 - Test of self confidence (could they overcome challenges?)
 - Test of a student's sense of social responsibility



- Standardized test scores for math, Chinese and English

Round I is called the baseline survey.

- Data Collection, Round II — after the nomination of candidates and the election of the CompassionateHearts Scholars, BUT before the participation of the CompassionateHearts Scholars in community service projects, we executed the first of two evaluation surveys. In order to be comparable to the baseline survey, we re-tested the students for their: self esteem; self confidence; sense of social responsibility and cognitive ability.
- Data Collection, Round III — at the end of the program for the year—after the participation of the CompassionateHearts Scholars in the community service projects. This was the second of the two evaluation surveys. The students received their third set of tests that were to measure changes in the main outcome variables.

In total, we surveyed more than 10,000 students from 75 schools and 592 classes. Copies of the survey instruments are posted on our website (reap.stanford.edu <Research>→<Survey Instruments and Data>→<CompassionateHearts>).





Who has a Compassionate Heart? (Results of Baseline—Round 1 Survey)

According to our data, we have found that students in China have a remarkable ability to choose representatives that are outstanding in a number of dimensions. The student who would soon be elected CompassionateHearts Scholars (but, at the time of the survey did not even know about the program) scored better on their standardized exam in almost all subjects—Math, Chinese and English. When examining all students in all of the classes across the entire sample, the scores on the standardized are statistically higher for the soon-to-be nominees/scholarship winners (Figure 1). When dividing the sample by county and by grade level, we find that the differences are even greater for certain classes. For example, in Lantian high schools, the average math scores in grade 11 are more than 10 points higher for the scholarship winners. The CompassionateHearts Scholars were, on average, scoring nearly 81 points on their Math tests; the rest of the class did not reach 73 points. The young women and men that ultimately were elected as CompassionHearts Scholars are indeed scholars—in academic sense of the term.

CompassionateHearts Scholars also have higher self esteem and more confidence. Before the launching of the program, the REAP survey team administered a self esteem exam to all 10,000-plus of the students in the study. Our measure of self esteem is based on an exam built from a translation of the Rosenberg self esteem exam (an exam that has served as one of the most popular ways of measuring self esteem in the education and other literatures since the 1970s). After scoring the exam using the standard scoring scale, we found that the soon-to-be CompassionateHearts Scholars were not only smarter, they had greater self esteem. Statistically, the raw scores of the scholarship winners were higher than those that

were nominated and did not win as well as those that were not nominated at all. More than one-third of the future CompassionateHeart Scholars scored above “30,” a score thought to mean that the test taker had extremely high self esteem (Figure 2). Only around one-quarter of those that did not win a scholarship scored

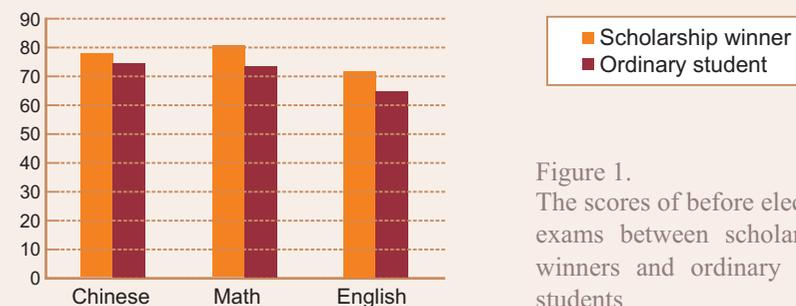


Figure 1.
The scores of before election exams between scholarship winners and ordinary students

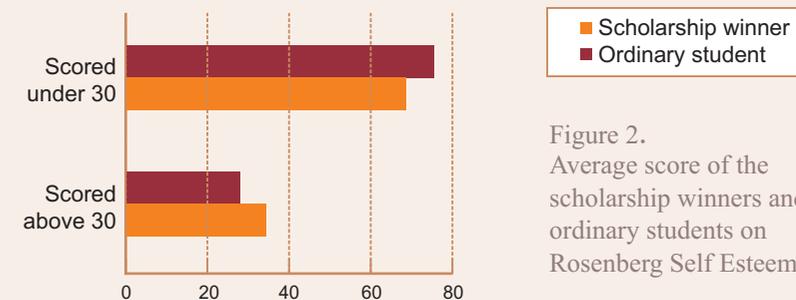


Figure 2.
Average score of the scholarship winners and ordinary students on Rosenberg Self Esteem Exam

were nominated and did not win as well as those that were not nominated at all. More than one-third of the future CompassionateHeart Scholars scored above “30,” a score thought to mean that the test taker had extremely high self esteem (Figure 2). Only around one-quarter of those that did not win a scholarship scored



Xinhang Zhang, 13, Aixin Middle School, Zhouzhi County, Shaanxi Province

Asked what he will do with the 400Y award he will receive as a CompassionateHeart Scholar, Xinhang says “I will give it to my mother to help out at my home.” Xinhang admits that his family’s economic situation is worse than that of most of his classmates. Nevertheless, his teachers say he is one of the top students and is always helping others when they have challenges studying. “I have fun helping others who need help,” Xinhang explains, “and I think they would help me one day if I need it.”



Perhaps most importantly—given the ultimate objective of the program, the students in the Cyrus Tang Foundation’s scholarship program elected Compassionate-Heart Scholars that scored higher on our baseline exam that sought to measure the student’s commitment to living a “Socially Responsible Life with High Morals.” Out of a total score of 44, the winners of the CompassionateHeart Scholars scored 37.6 points, a level that was statistically significantly higher than the students in the rest of the class. This result, of course, provides a lot of confidence that the program will end up with excellent role models. Even before the program (either the election or the participation in the CompassionateHearts projects), CompassionateHearts Scholars were more socially responsible.

Using more sophisticated multivariate analysis, we also discovered that these results held up. What determines a CompassionateHeart Scholar? Other things held constant, the students who had higher grades, higher self esteem, more self confidence and that were already more socially responsible were the exact ones that were being elected.



Interestingly, however, despite the fact that the scholars were outstanding young individuals, in many different respects, students also tended to elect those students that were somewhat poorer. More than 20 percent of the scholarship winners were from families so poor that they did not have a house or their house was worth less than 5,000 yuan (certainly a house made out of mud and straw). In contrast, less than 10 percent of those with houses worth more than 50,000 yuan were selected by their peers.

Hence, the results of the baseline surveys—before the program was even launched—provides good news. The Tang Foundation program officers should be heartened in that the students in their program schools are nominating and electing students who are outstanding and have the characteristics of students that they should want as a role model.

However, these results also raise a cautionary flag for the project and make the evaluation of the project more complicated. If the purpose of the program is to improve grades, bolster self esteem, raise self confidence and teach social responsibility, it is possible that the way that the students are elected is making the job more difficult (or perhaps redundant). If the students already have high grades, high self esteem, high self confidence and are already relatively socially responsible, can any program make them better? This is why in the next sections of the analysis we need to look at differences over time (between round 1 and round 2; and between round 2 and round 3) and not at levels. It is not enough to find the grades, self esteem, self confidence and a sense of social responsibility are high after the implementation of the program, since those that participated in the program already excelled in all of these areas. The main metric, then, will be if the ComassionateHearts scholars improve over time more than the rest of the students.



Do Elections Matter? (Results of Round 2)

To evaluate the impact of the first part of the CompassionateHearts program—that is after the nomination and election of the CompassionateHearts Scholars, but before the community service began—we collected data during round 2 of our survey (our first evaluation survey) and calculated the differences in the outcome variables for three types of students—those students that were nominated and won (henceforth, the CompassionateHearts scholars); those students that were nominated and did not win (CompassionateHearts nominees); and the rest of the students (those that were not nominated). In all cases, we calibrate and report the differences relative to the group that improved the least.

According to the first round of our evaluation surveys, the election process—both the nomination and the election—appear to have a positive effect on standardized test scores. As Figure 3 shows, both the CompassionateHearts scholars and CompassionateHearts nominees improved their test scores more than the rest of the students. The students who were ultimately elected to be the CompassionateHearts Scholars improved their scores by 13 points more than relatively to the rest of the students. The test scores of nominees rose by 10 points. Interestingly, the evaluation survey supports the assertions of the Tang Foundation leadership who have been quoted as saying that they believed their program improved the grades of students. What may be surprising, however, is that the improvement in the standardized test scores occurred as a result of the process of being elected itself—even before there were any community service activities. One explanation was discovered during interviews of the students

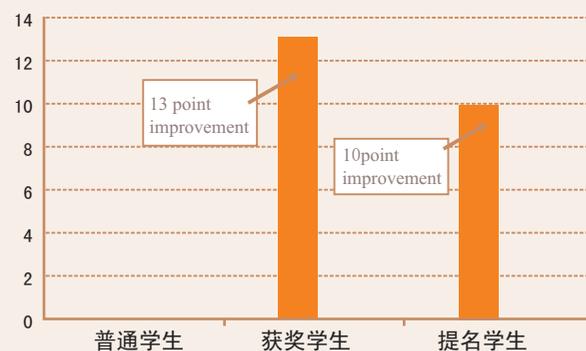


Figure 3.
Change in students' standardized test scores from before to after the CompassionateHearts Scholars election (adjusted for grade level)

(done after the surveys were completed), students told us that after they were nominated/elected they felt that they must work extra hard to prove to their classmates that they were deserving of the class' support.

Grades may also have risen due to a rise in the self esteem of CompassionateHeart scholars and nominees. According to our analysis, after the election (and before the community service phase of the program), the scores on the self esteem test rose more for scholars and nominees than the rest of the students. Because we are examining differences, we find that the election apparently had the effect of increasing self esteem. The self esteem scores of CompassionateHearts scholars (nominees) were not only higher to start with (see discussion above), they rose by 12 points (10 points) more than the rest of the students (for comparison, the total score standardized to 100). The election part of the Tang Foundation program clearly is an important component of the overall process.

Significantly, however, self confidence and the sense of social responsibility were not affected by the elections. And, in fact, this might be what we should expect. Since the only programmatic activity that occurred between the baseline (round 1) and the first evaluation survey (round 2) was the election, there is no reason to believe that self confidence should rise. Self confidence is often thought to be built by experience in overcoming challenges. Since students had not had an opportunity to design, organize and implement any community service projects, there had been no opportunity to build self confidence. The same was true with their sense of social responsibility. In short, the election part of the Tang Foundation CompassionateHearts Scholars program is important—but only for performance on cognitive scores and self esteem; self confidence and social responsibility were not affected.

Impacts of Community Service (Results of Round 3)

The results of the second evaluation survey (which was used to compare the changes in the outcome variables before and after the community service component of the CompassionateHearts scholars program) demonstrate that community service is complementary to the election phase of the program. Whereas elections did not affect self



confidence and social responsibility, our results clearly show that community service does. According to Figure 4 (next page), between round 2 and round 3, the self confidence of CompassionateHearts scholars (those that were the core members of the CompassionateHearts clubs which helped design, organize and implement community service programs) rose relative to both nominees and the rest of the students. Likewise, Figure 5 (next page) also shows that the sense of social responsibility of CompassionateHearts scholars rose more than nominees and the rest of the students. Clearly, one interpretation of our findings is that when students go out into society and do projects that help their communities (activities such as taking poor children to museums; visiting the elderly in nursing homes; cleaning up school yards, hospital grounds and other community spaces), their self confidence and sense of responsibility appear to grow.



Figure 4: Change in the Self-confidence of the CompassionateHearts Scholars after participation in the Community Service Clubs, relative to the change by students who did not participate.

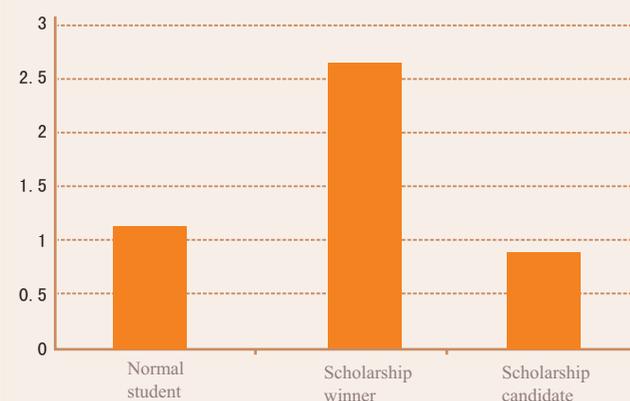


Figure 5: Change in the Social Responsibility of the CompassionateHearts Scholars after participation in the Community Service Clubs, relative to the change by students who did not

While the results that community service projects raises self confidence and social responsibility are heartening, policy makers (and parents and educators) are also worried about the cost of this social education. Does the time and effort spent in implementing community service projects negatively affect grades? One of the most policy-relevant findings of our results is that there appears to be little negative effect on standardized test scores of those that participate in community service. Figure 6 (next page) shows that while the grades of all students fell (both those that participated and those that did not—perhaps due to the fact that the round 3 tests were inherently more difficult), there is little difference between the test scores of CompassionateHearts scholars, who spent on average 10 days performing community service, and the rest of the students, who did not participate in community service projects. It is important to note that the small difference that appears in the graph is not statistically significant. In other words, according to the round 2 and round 3 surveys, there is no perceptible fall in the test scores of those students that participated in community service.





Perhaps the more relevant question is: What is the overall academic impact, if any, experienced by the scholarship winners? To answer this question we compare the standardized test scores of round 1 and round 3—before the program and after both parts of the CompassionateHearts program—the election and the community service. The CompassionateHearts scholarship winners not only showed a dramatic and statistically significant increase in their standardized test scores over the program period, the increase in their scores outpaced the changes of both the nominees and the rest of the students. Of course, as we know from the discussion above, this gain is almost all from the election part of the program; and not due to community service per se.

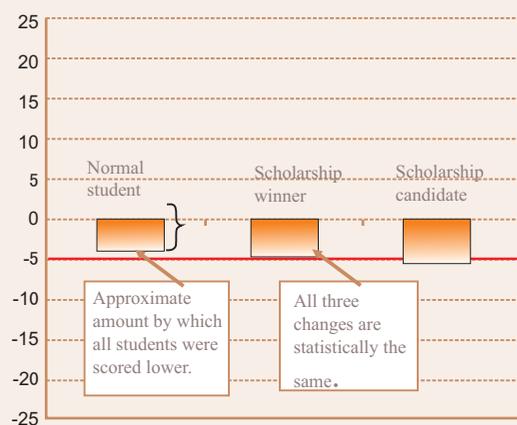


Figure 6: The change in standardized test scores between round 2 and round 3 (or the impact of community service on scores).

Conclusion

Through our evaluation of the Tang Foundation's innovative CompassionateHearts program, we have been able to demonstrate several key points. First, China's middle school and high school students apparently are aware enough of their peers that when asked (through their nominations and votes), they are able to identify outstanding colleagues who are above average in many different dimensions. The evaluation also shows that when implemented in full—both the election part and the community service part of the CompassionateHearts program—the CompassionateHearts scholars improve their academic performance, their self esteem, their self confidence and their sense of social responsibility. Given that they improve more than even the nominees (who should be fairly similar in characteristics to those that ultimately won the election), the measured differences may actually be due to the program (and not some unobserved ability of the students). Perhaps most importantly, while community service is shown to raise self confidence and social responsibility, even though students spend considerable time on these projects, their standardized test scores do not appear to suffer. These results hold up to both rigorous descriptive analysis and multivariate analysis.

Therefore, the project shows that if the call for introducing more community service into the curriculum is sincere, there is really no reason not to go forward with community service-oriented curriculums and extracurricular projects. The independent evaluation that we carried out shows community service appears to be win-win-win. Win for the character of the student; win for their academic performance; and win for the community.

Caution, however, needs to be exercised. Despite the strong findings in this evaluation, the results are only for two counties in one province of China. Moreover, the evaluation did not unambiguously identify the effects of the program. The effects of the program on measured outcomes (on standardized test scores, self esteem, self confidence and social responsibility) were found for the CompassionateHearts

scholars, who were elected by their peers—at least partially on the basis of these very characteristics. If the improvement in these outcomes are associated with their beginning levels (that is, if there had been no program), the program might have less of an impact. It is for this reason that in the future, Tang Foundation and other groups that are serious about understanding the true effects of community service programs should make even more rigorous attempts to design and implement their programs and have an even more powerful evaluation component built in.

However, if ultimately the results of these and future evaluation hold up (as we hope they do), China's future will be one that can be characterized by greater civility without sacrificing the academic dreams of educators, parents and students . . . a bright future indeed!

