

# Best Practices and Effectiveness of Service Learning

## RESEARCH BY:

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Service learning is an academic pedagogy that connects the classroom to the community and back to the classroom, and is always undertaken with a goal of enacting meaningful and helpful contributions to the local, regional, national, and/or global community.

There are many variations on the definition of service learning, but all definitions share in common the above goals. Thus, both curricular and integrated co-curricular program design should be clearly geared toward meeting the above foundational goals.

The fact that service learning is complex and nuanced, and that it doesn't easily fit into formulaic theoretical and empirical categories, is also the significant strength of service learning as a pedagogy. It requires some creativity, insight, and flexibility on the part of the program, the educator, the student and the community partner. In exchange, it offers a pedagogy that is proven to significantly increase student learning, critical thinking, and personal outcomes, while also increasing parent, teacher, and school outcomes.

At the heart of all service learning is the basic premise that classroom learning can be informed and increased by community service, and that communities and the work of community agencies can be improved through connections to:

- ▶ academic content such as theory, literature and historical reviews
- ▶ practically applicable skills such as math, physics, statistics, business planning, and strong writing
- ▶ conceptual understandings of both micro and macro approaches to identifying social problems and their solutions

Thus, by definition, service learning takes place through the classroom and is directly connected to course curriculum and content.

Service learning engages teachers and students with their community in a structured way that allows for learning objectives to be met by students, and needs to be addressed in the community. Thus, service learning is distinctly different from community service, volunteerism, and a wide range of other experiential learning frameworks as it is situated firmly and intentionally inside academic curriculum and tied to key learning outcomes.

## BEST PRACTICES OF SERVICE LEARNING

Research shows that the best service learning (i.e. the most effective):

- ▶ Includes group action projects for students.
- ▶ Involves, in some form, interaction with a community partner. This can be as simple as having the partner address students about community needs, helping to educate the students about an existing social problem the partner is attempting to address, and inviting the students to participate in creatively identifying ways and carrying forward action plans to help alleviate the social problem.
- ▶ Connects the classroom to the community. When possible, it is best practice to connect the social problem being addressed directly to the curricular content being studied. In cases where this is not possible, at a minimum, course learning should be intentionally applied to the identified social problem. For instance, though the curriculum for Calculus may not address low-wage workers and their struggles, students may use their math skills to improve community support programs for these workers.
- ▶ Does not put unnecessary burden on the community partner.
- ▶ Pushes student frames by exposure to a diversity of stakeholders (community partners, teacher, peer group partners, etc.) with a diversity of life experiences, goals, and working styles.
- ▶ Includes integrated personal (and sometimes group) reflection for students.
- ▶ Is graded thoughtfully as part of the academic expectations of course curriculum.

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning is a relatively new, though deeply respected and integrated teaching approach, having largely developed over the past 20 years.

To summarize the research without detailing it is a difficult task, but useful in establishing a baseline understanding of the deep effectiveness that service learning offers. To date, there have been significantly more studies focused on the effectiveness of service learning experiences on the college level than on the high school level, largely because service learning has had a longer and deeper presence in higher education.

Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray provide an authoritative summation of the research literature in higher education, in their report *At a Glance: What We Know About the Effects of Service-Learning on College Students, Faculty, Institutions and Communities, 1993-2000 (3rd Edition)*. The research findings from the college level can be extrapolated to the high school level, and the growing bulk of research on high school service learning programs supports this. For instance, the Generator School Network (GSN), a program of the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) documents impressive outcomes for K-12 students in their 2010 report, *Service-Learning and Academic Achievement Research Summary*.

In addition to these two seminal reports, there is a great deal of research supporting the effectiveness of service learning on both college and high school levels. Below is a summary that incorporates some of the most important learnings about service learning outcomes as taken from this diverse research literature, and which supports the three major goals of service learning.



### IMPROVED PERSONAL OUTCOMES:

- ▶ Service learning has a positive effect on sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development.
- ▶ Middle and high school students who engage in high-quality service learning programs show increases in measures of personal and social responsibility, communication, and sense of educational competence.
- ▶ Students who participate in service learning are less likely to engage in "risk" behaviors.
- ▶ Students who engage in service learning are more likely to increase their sense of self-esteem.



### ENHANCED CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY:

- ▶ Service learning helps develop students' sense of civic and social responsibility and their citizenship skills.
- ▶ Students who engage in service learning rank responsibility as a more important value and report a higher sense of responsibility to their school than comparison groups.
- ▶ High school students who participate in service learning and service activities are more likely to be engaged in community organizations and to vote 15 years after their participation than comparison groups.
- ▶ Service learning students show an increase in their awareness of community needs, believe that they can make a difference, and are committed to service now and later in life.
- ▶ High school students who participate in high-quality service learning develop more sophisticated understandings of socio-historical contexts, are likely to think about politics and morality in society, and are likely to consider how to effect social change.
- ▶ Generally, research shows that service learning has a positive impact on student cognitive moral development (though some studies show no effect, positive or negative)



### IMPROVED SOCIAL SKILLS:

- ▶ Students who engage in service learning show greater empathy than comparison groups.
- ▶ Service learning is effective in reducing stereotypes and facilitating cultural and racial understanding.
- ▶ Service learning has a positive effect on students' interpersonal development and the ability to relate to culturally diverse groups.
- ▶ Students who engage in service learning are more likely to treat one another kindly, help one another, and care about doing their best.
- ▶ Teachers and students in schools with high-quality service learning programs report an increase in mutual respect.
- ▶ Service learning builds cohesiveness and more positive peer relations (among students and among teachers), along with more positive relations between students and teachers.



### POSITIVE FEELINGS TOWARD SCHOOL:

- ▶ Students report stronger educator relationships than those who are not involved in Service Learning.
- ▶ College students engaged in service learning have an increased likelihood of graduating.
- ▶ Educators and students in schools with strong service learning programs report a more positive school climate as a result of a feeling of greater connectedness to the school as well as decreased teacher turnover and increased teacher collegiality.



### IMPROVED LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- ▶ Students and faculty report a positive impact on college student academic learning.
- ▶ Students and faculty report improved college student ability to apply learning in 'the real world.'
- ▶ A good deal of research indicates that service learning has a positive impact on academic learning. (No research indicates a negative impact.)
- ▶ In particular, there is a positive impact on such academic outcomes as demonstrated complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development.
- ▶ 7th-12th grade students engaged in service learning outperform comparison students in reading, mathematics, history, and science, and are more apt to complete high school.
- ▶ Service learning students significantly outperform in comparison to students in overall grades, grades in mathematics and science, and school engagement.
- ▶ Participation in service learning has been associated with higher scores on state tests of basic skills and higher grades in several state studies.
- ▶ Eighty-three percent of schools with service learning programs report that the grade-point averages of participating students improve 76% of the time.
- ▶ Students report that they learn more in service learning classes than in other classes.
- ▶ Surveys of Learn and Serve America participants in Wisconsin found that approximately 98 percent of teachers who offered service learning said that students learned more than what they would have learned through regular instruction.



### ENHANCED LEARNING AND PERSONAL OUTCOMES FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS:

- ▶ Low socio-economic status students who participate in service learning score higher in achievement, motivation, grades, bonding to school, and attendance than similar students who did not.
- ▶ Academic benefits were more pronounced for minority students; minority and disadvantaged students showed significantly greater long-term academic benefits than others.



### CAREER DEVELOPMENT:

- ▶ Service learning has a positive effect on skill development and problem-solving that enhances career development.
- ▶ Students who participate in service learning report gaining career skills and communication skills, along with increases in knowledge of career possibilities.
- ▶ Students who engage in high-quality service learning develop positive work attitudes and skills.
- ▶ Teachers believe that participation in service learning increases career awareness.

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