Service Learning and Student Retention

A Brief Overview

Numerous studies have been completed seeking to answer questions about the cognitive and academic benefits of service learning. These studies have ranged from individual interviews with service participants at universities and colleges around the country, to controlled experiments including hundreds of participants. Although the process for researching student retention has varied the results of such studies generally agree that service learning has positive impacts on student retention, academic skills and motivation to learn.

Academic and cognitive benefits of service learning can be separated into two general categories: increases in academic skills, and psychological benefits that promote learning. Through the experience of service learning students sharpen a number of academic skills such as problem analysis, critical thinking, logical reasoning, detailed observation, and issue identification. (Bhaerman, pp.37-38) Students also experience a higher or more complex level of thinking. In addition to this, students gain more knowledge about the outside world, increasing their capacity to learn and retain school materials. (Eyler, Root & Giles in *At a Glance*, pp.40)

Students who engage in service learning also experience increases in their personal motivations to learn. This is largely because they acquire the improved ability to connect what they learn in the classroom to the "real" world, and subsequently appreciate the material's merit. (Cohen in *At a Glance*, pp.30) Their learning experiences become more meaningful and effective, and students more motivated to work. They learn to set their own learning goals, moving from the role of a "receiver" of learning to a "producer" of learning. (Bhaerman, pp.37)

Other aspects of service learning programs add to the intellectual experience of students participating in service learning. To start, the facilitated student to faculty interactions that often come along with service learning programs allow for positive relationships to develop which can be beneficial for both the student and the faculty. (Eyler, Giles & Braxton in *At a Glance*, pp.39) In addition, students learn to work in large and small groups with both youth and adults. This broadens their ability to value different opinions and increases their open-mindedness. Finally, because students are engaged actively in society they learn how to respond to social problems, exercise their democratic rights, and gain experiences to help them address social issues. (Bhaerman, pp.37-38)

These academic benefits should be considered in the context of the service-learning program that can help promote such learning through various practices. Programs can enhance the level of learning for their participants by increasing the amount of time spent in service, the number of opportunities for the student to engage with beneficiaries, the amount of class time spent discussing the service, the number of assignments that integrate course materials with the experience, and the frequency and variety of in- and out-of-class reflection opportunities. (Mabry, pp.32 and Cohen in *At a Glance*, pp.30-31) In addition to this, different types of service programs produce different outcomes

in the level of learning. This is based on evidence that peer-tutoring programs seem to experience the strongest results from student participants. (Bhaerman, pp.41) All of these practices yield a higher quality experience that lends more positive cognitive and academic benefits for the students.

For further information, consult the following resources:

Service Learning and Student Retention Resources

- **Astin, A.W., et. al., "Long-Term Effects of Volunteerism During the Undergraduate Years," CA: HERI, UCLA.**

This study addresses the question of whether effects of volunteer service during the undergraduate years persist once students leave college. Data are drawn from 12,376 students attending 209 institutions who were followed up four and nine years after college entry. Results show that even when pre-college service participation is controlled, student participation in volunteer service during the undergraduate years is positively associated with a variety of cognitive and affective outcomes measured five years after leaving college.

- **Astin, A.W., et. al., "How Undergraduates are Affected by Service Participation." *Journal of College Student Development,* vol. 39, pp. 251-263., 1998**.

This study surveyed 42 institutions engaged in Learn and Serve America's programs and found that community service was associated with retention and graduation -- this is service -- not necessarily service-learning. The study showed the students who participated in service participation showed favorable impacts such as higher GPAs, greater retention, a greater likelihood of degree completion, more interaction with faculty, and an increase in knowledge as well.

- **Axsom, Trish, "Effects of Service Learning on Student Retention and Success, National Society for Experiential Education," in *NSEE Quarterly*, Summer, 1999.**

Southwestern College (SWC) students who participated in service learning were significantly more likely to complete their English composition course and report greater agreement with statements about learning as it related to career and civic awareness. However, student success rates were not significantly different for service learning students.

- **Bacon, Nora, "Setting the Course for Service-Learning Research," Reflections, Fall 2001.**

This resource contains a discussion of the types of research done on the effectiveness of service learning. Looks for ways to demonstrate the value of service learning besides traditional numerical data.

- **Bhaerman, Robert, et.al., "What are the Purported Benefits and Results of Service-Learning," in *The Role of Service-Learning in Educational Reform*, (pp. 37-49), NC: Simon & Schuster Custom Publishing, 1998.**

This section of the book reviews the claims made for service learning, several evaluation guideposts and challenges, and reported quantitative and qualitative research findings.   It discusses the purported benefits for students' personal growth and development, social growth and development, and also academic or intellectual growth and development, through the use of several studies.

- **Eyler, Janet, et. al., "At a Glance: What We Know About the Effects of Service-Learning on College Students, Faculty, Institutions and Community,1993-2001:Third Edition," August 31, 2001.**

"At a Glance" summarizes the findings of research on the effects of service learning over the past few years and includes an annotated bibliography of more resources on student retention.

Studies have found that the effects on students are generally in five main areas: personal, social, learning, career development, and relationship towards the institution. The affect concerning student retention and academics include a positive impact such as an improved ability to apply what is learned to the "real world," increased abilities in understanding complexities, problem analysis, critical thinking and cognitive development. Studies reported mixed results on whether service learning has a positive impact on grades and GPA as well as cognitive moral development.

*Note: This resource is available at the Campus Compact website, under "Resources"

- **Eyler, Janet, et. al., "The Impact of Service-Learning on College Students" in *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Vol. 4, MI: The University of Michigan Press, Fall 1997.**

While service-learning programs have become popular in college campuses across the country, there has been relatively little empirical data about their effects on students. The Comparing Models of Service-Learning research project has gathered data from over 1500 students at 20 colleges and universities to attempt to answer some oft he pressing questions about the value added to students by combining community service and academic study. The study has found that students who choose service learning differ from those who do not in the target attitudes, skills, values and understanding about social

issues. And participation in service learning has an impact on these outcomes over the course of a semester.

- **Gray, Mariann, et. al., "Combining Service and Learning in Higher Education: Evaluation of the Learn and Serve America Higher Education Program," CA: Rand Publications, 1999.**

This report presents evaluation results of the Learn and Serve America, Higher Education (LSAHE) initiative, sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNS). CNS is an independent federal agency that operates AmeriCorps, the National Senior Service Corps, VISTA, ACTION, and Learn and Serve America, among other programs. Learn and Serve America aims to incorporate community service into academic learning in both K-12 education and higher education.

This report addresses impacts of LSAHE on students, communities, and higher education institutions and is based on three years of data collection and observation conducted by Rand from Fiscal 1995 through Fiscal 1997.
This report serves three audiences. First, the findings offer feedback that can help CNS plan for the future of LSAHE. Second, national policymakers may find the results relevant to decision making about future federal support for LSAHE. Third, higher education administrators and practitioners may find the report useful for program and policy development at the campus level.

- **Hesser, Garry. "Faculty Assessment of Student Learning: Outcomes Attributed to Service-Learning and Evidence of Changes in Faculty Attitudes About Experiential Education" in *Michigan Journal of Community Service and Learning*, Vol. 2, MI: The University of Michigan Press, Fall 1995.**

This article endeavors to answer two questions: does combining service and learning in college level courses contribute to the learning outcomes desired for the course, and what explains why faculty have moved from skepticism to affirmation concerning the answer to the first question? In the past ten years faculty in a wide variety of post-secondary institutions and virtually all disciplines have begun to integrate field study in the form of service-learning into their courses. The article argues that faculty assessment in one of the best proxy measures available to answer the question of whether learning outcomes derive from service-learning and that their positive assessment of that question can be explained contextually, empirically and experientially, using both quantitative and qualitative measures. This exploratory study reviews finding from a sample of 48 faculty from sixteen different disciplines from across the nation.

- **Luchs, Kathleen Parks, "Selected Changes in Urban High School Students After Participation in Community Based Learning and Service Activities." UMI dissertation reproductions: Order No.: 8202622,1980.**

This study measured selected changes in high school students as a result of community involvement and participation in order to realize the goal of responsible citizenship. It was designed to ascertain whether students who experienced community service displayed more positive attitudes toward learning than students who had not experienced community service.

The study investigated changes in the areas of: student attitudes toward future life goals as measured by actual behaviors in planning and exploring careers, feelings of personal adequacy or inadequacy as measured by self-esteem in social situations, attitudes toward helping others as measured by social and personal responsibility indices, attitudes toward responsible community and school citizenship as measured by attendance and disciplinary referrals.

Three hundred urban high school students who were enrolled in the "general" course of study were administered pretests. One hundred thirty-six of the original one hundred fifty experimental group students completed the post-test after finishing thirty hours of community learning/service activities. One hundred twenty six control group students completed the post-test. Student attendance and disciplinary referrals were examined, and interviews were conducted with ten students and five teachers.

The following research hypotheses were tested: (1) There is a difference in attitudes toward school, toward helping others, and toward future life goals as measured by three attitude scales between urban high school students who are involved in a community based learning/service experience and those who are not involved in such an experience. (2) There is a difference in the level of active community involvement and students' commitment to the educational goal of responsible citizenship as measured by better school attendance between urban high school students who are involved in a community based learning/service experience and those who are not involved in such an experience. (3) There is a difference in the level of active community involvement and students' commitment to the educational goal of responsible citizenship as measured by fewer school disciplinary offenses between urban high school students who are involved in a community based learning/service experience and those who are not involved in such an experience.

A t-test was performed on pretest control and experimental group sample means and variances in order to determine the suitability of the groups for comparison. A paired sample t-test, a one-way analysis of variance, a three-way analysis of variance, and a discriminant analysis were used to treat the data.

Changes within experimental and control groups were calculated by comparing pre and post test means and variances in each group treating the groups as wholes, and then by examining males and females separately. Forty-eight variables were grouped into ten clustering variables: Career, Traditional Career, Social Welfare, Duty, Competence, Efficacy, Performance, Inadequacy, Absence, Referral.

Results of the data analysis provided support for the hypotheses. The following conclusions were reached: (1) Students who were involved in the experiential learning/service program demonstrated positive and significant gains in planning and career exploration behaviors. (2) Students who were involved in the experiential learning/service program demonstrated positive and significant gains in responsible attitudes toward others, in competence to act upon the feeling of concern for others, and in the sense of efficacy that permits one to believe that taking action and demonstrating concern can make a difference. (3) Students who were involved in experiential learning/service programs demonstrated positive and significant gains in their feelings of self-esteem and personal adequacy in social situations. (4) Students who were involved in experiential programs demonstrated positive and significant gains in school attendance and in acceptable school behaviors. (Author)

- **Mabry, J. Beth. "Pedagogical Variations in Service-Learning and Student Outcomes: How Time, Contact and Reflection Matter" in *Michigan Journal of Community Service*, Vol. 5, MI: The University of Michigan Press, Fall 1998.**

This study contributes to more effective practice by assessing how student outcomes are affected by amount and kind of contact with service beneficiaries, and frequency and variety of reflection activities. In particular, the impacts of these pedagogical variations are examined in relation to students' (1) personal social values (2) civic attitudes, (3) perceived course effects of civic attitudes and (4) self-reported academic benefits. Results suggest service-learning is more effective as a civic and academic pedagogy when students have (1) at least fifteen to twenty hours of service, (2) frequent contact with the beneficiaries of their service, (3) weekly in-class reflection, (4) ongoing and summative written reflection, and (5) discussions of their service experiences both with the instructors and the site supervisors.

- **Mellblom, Caron I., et. al., "Engaging University Students in Community Service for Improved Educational Outcomes" in *NSEE Quarterly*, Summer 2001.**

In this article, we examine the effect of pre-service and outreach service-learning programs on university students who indicate an interest in teacher education. Results are reported on two programs that utilized service-learning experiences to attract more students into teacher education, to provide pre-student teacher

experiences in community work settings, and to address some of the social needs of local school districts through curriculum reform. We highlight unique features of teacher training at two very different institutions and examine the programmatic impact on the work of the university students.

- **Moely, Barbara E., et. al., "Changes in College Students' Attitudes and Intentions for Civic Involvement as a Function of Service-Learning Experiences." (n.d.)**

College students, 217 doing service learning and 324 not so engaged, completed the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ) at the beginning and end of a semester, reporting their views regarding civic and interpersonal skills and attitudes. Students who were doing service learning showed increases over the semester in their plans for future civic action, assessments of their own interpersonal and problem-solving skills and their leadership skills, and agreement with items emphasizing societal factors that affect individual outcomes (social justice). No differences were seen in students' Diversity Attitudes. Students engaged in service learning showed greater satisfaction with their courses, reporting higher levels of learning about the academic field and the community than did students not participating in service learning. Among service-learning students, satisfaction with aspects of the course and with service contributions was related to social justice attitudes, appreciation of diversity, and plans for future civic action.

- **Osborne, Randall E. et.al., "Student Effects of Service-Learning: Tracking Change Across a Semester" in *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning,* Vol. 5, MI: The University of Michigan Press, Fall 1998.**

Four sections of a pharmacy communications course were randomly assigned to include either a traditional laboratory project or a service-learning project. Beginning and end of semester data was collected. and there were no significant differences between the non-service-learning and service-learning samples at the outset. Data collected late in the semester revealed significant positive changes for the service-learning participants in cognitive complexity, social competency, perceived ability to work with diverse others, and self-certainty. Service-learning participants also showed a significant decline in global self-esteem. Analyses of students' written work illustrate important differences between the two groups of participants on major course learning objectives.

- **"The Role of College Presidents in Recruitment and Retention," DC: American Association of State Colleges and Universities. (n.d.)**

This resource contains data on Presidential involvement in recruiting and retaining students. It also looks at CEO's role in such activities.

- **Roose, D. et. al., "Black student retention study." Unpublished paper. Oberlin College, 1997.**

This smaller institutional study of black students at Oberlin also found service participation linked to retention and graduation -- but again service not necessarily service-learning.

- **Shumer, Robert, "Community-Based Learning: Humanizing Education," in *Journal of Adolescence*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 357-367 (Reprint: UnCover), 1994.**

From dropout prevention to civic education, youth service programs often have differing goals. A study of the Community-Based Learning program, a Job Training Partnership Act sponsored dropout prevention effort which focuses on youth service, career exploration, civic education, and academic development, demonstrated that learning in the community can be effective in improving attendance and school grades, as will as helping students to learn. One major contributor to this success is the introduction of adults and college students and college students from the community into the educational process, encouraging more human and personal interaction both on and off campus. (Author)

- **Smith, Marilyn W., "An Assessment of Intended Outcomes and Perceived Effects of Community Service-Learning Participation for College Students: 'Striking a Chord in the Key of C'" UMI dissertation reproductions: Order No.: 9407691, Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Maryland College Park, 1993.**

Institutions of higher education are integrating community service as an element of the undergraduate experience, and influential politicians and national organizations are creating policies that connect service and education, despite the lack of scholarly research into the effects of service participation on the students who serve. The purpose of this research was to clarify the intended outcomes of Service-Learning participation for college students who serve, as described by "influentials" that promote Service-Learning as an undergraduate experience; and to describe the effects of Service-Learning participation on college students who serve, as perceived by students who serve.

The study is descriptive and analytical. Qualitative methods of inquiry, including content analysis of documents and individual and focus group interviews, were used at two levels: The Institutional Level - One institution of higher education was selected for a case-study. Four campus constituencies were represented-the administration, faculty, program managers, and students; The National Level - The researcher studied one national organization that promotes collegiate community service, and policy makers who sponsored service-learning legislation.

The researcher explicated thirteen (13) distinctive themes of service-learning outcomes: Personal Connections, Career Development/Goal Setting, Change, Competencies, Contribution, Spiritual Development, Commitment, Clarification of Values, Confrontation, Cognitive Connections / Curriculum, Self-Concept, Civic Participation, and Emotions. The findings reveal considerable harmony, as well as dissonance between the influentials' intended outcomes and the students' perceived effects.

Analysis of service-learning discourse extracted common words and phrases through which the conceptual themes for outcomes are conveyed, many of which begin with the letter "C" and are communicated in musical metaphors. Thus, the researcher developed the "Lexicon of Intended Outcomes for Service-Learning as an Element of the Curriculum in Higher Education-The Key of C", which simplifies, organizes, and clarifies the themes and related vocabulary of service-learning outcomes.

- **Tierney, William, "Power, Identity, and the Dilemma of College Student Departure," CA: Center for Higher Ed Policy Analysis, 2000.**

The purpose of this paper is neither to rehash concerns raised in previous work nor to offer yet another exegesis on the lessons of critical theory and postmodernism. Rather, the paper has three objectives. First it considers the idea of culture and how culture influences our conceptions of student departure. The paper then posits a model based on critical notions of power and community. It concludes with an examination of how such a model might be employed as an intervention for those students who are most at risk of departing from college - low income, urban, Black and Hispanic youth.

- **Wagener, Ursula & Michael T., Nettles, "It Takes A Community to Educate Students," *Change*, March/April 1998.**

Over the last decade, the fiscal pressures on higher education, combined with new kinds of students-older, part-time, transient, less well-prepared academically-have thrust student retention until graduation to the forefront of higher education's national agenda. Given their experiences, and their own need to refocus on retention, we believe Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have a lot to say to colleges and universities across the nation.

- **Williams, Rick, "The Impact of Field Education on Student Development: Research Findings," *Journal of Cooperative Education*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 29-45, Win 1991.**

A literature review focused on effects of high school, junior high, and college student participation in field experience programs on personal, career, and

affective development and academic achievement. Students appeared more responsible, mature, self-confident, socially adept, interested in school, and knowledgeable about work.

Notes:

- Tanya Renner at Kapolani College in Hawaii has done a study showing Service Learning had a positive effect on retention there. Info should be available on their Website -(which this Colorado site links to). We are conducting a similar study at Pasadena City College but won't have our raw data until May. As a cautionary note -- I've heard that Andy Furco at UC Berkeley is studying Service Learning evaluation and says that these retention studies are difficult to reproduce. Perhaps the results vary greatly from campus to campus.

- It struck me when Janet mentioned the HERI study (Astin & Sax) that I'd forgotten that study in the moment of my response to you. I also came across an email updating me on a study being done at IUPUI. Here's the text of Richard's message to the listserv.

  Indiana Campus Compact has provided the Center for Public Service and Leadership at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) with funding for a three-year research project on service-learning and retention. Through that grant, I am conducting multi-campus research on first-time student participation in service-learning courses and the relationship to persistence to the second year. I'm trying to make sure that I don't miss any of the relevant literature that is available on first year experiences. Does anyone have suggestions of research specific to outcomes of service experiences in the first year? rmuthiah@iupui.edu I would suggest contacting him directly for an update, although I believe he's in the process of analyzing the data.