The Impact of Service-Learning on College Students

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While service-learning programs have become popular on 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 of the 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.

Introduction

"Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both" (Honnet and Poulsen, 1989). This quote captures the core of widely held practitioner belief about what is unique in service-learning, i.e. programs which combine community service with study of particular subject matter. Learning improves the quality of service today and more importantly helps sustain it throughout a citizen’s life by developing attitudes toward community and a commitment to making a difference. Service transforms learning, changing inert knowledge to knowledge and skills that students can use in their communities. And this practitioner wisdom about effective learning is consistent with a long tradition of experiential learning theory from Dewey to modern cognitive scientists. Addressing authentic problems in the field and bringing critical analysis to bear encourages students to generate and answer real questions and helps them develop a nuanced understanding of issues in situational context. (Giles & Eyler, 1994)

This belief has led to a virtual explosion of post-secondary service-learning programs (O’Brien, 1993). While the political support on campuses for such programs has grown, there is very little empirical research to go along with the social and theoretical justifications for service-learning, and what research there is has been mixed (Giles & Eyler, in press).

On many campuses there is debate about whether community service should be co-curricular or part of the curriculum. Some are requiring or considering requiring community service or are incorporating service activities into their student orientation. There is a growing demand for research information about the impact of service on students to assist decision-making. This national comparative study is among the first to focus on filling the most critical gaps in the research literature, identified by practitioners and researchers in the 1991 Wingspread Conference — Setting the Agenda for Effective Research in Combining Service and Learning in the 1990s (Giles, Honnet, & Migliore, 1991).

Here we will address two critical issues for practitioners attempting to decide if service-learning should be included in the college curriculum. First, we examine whether students who choose service-learning differ from those who do not in their attitudes, skills, perceptions and values. And second, we determine what impact service-learning has on those outcomes over the course of a semester.

The Project

The Comparing Models of Service-learning project is a national study of the impact of service-learning programs on students’ citizenship values, skills, attitudes and understanding. The data discussed here were gathered from over 1500 students at 20 colleges and universities during the spring of 1995; students completed surveys at the beginning and end of their service-learning experience. Colleges were selected which had a variety of service-learning activities and to represent different