What Do We Most Need to Know About the Impact of Service-Learning on Student Learning?

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Survey research over the past decade gives us ample evidence of the impact of service-learning on the personal and social development of college students; the evidence for its cognitive impact is less well developed. In order to improve the quality of academic service-learning, we need to move beyond surveys and identify the intellectual outcomes best facilitated through service-learning, create measures of those learning outcomes that can be imbedded into the instructional process, and conduct experimental studies of alternative pedagogical techniques to identify those which produce optimal learning and cognitive development.

There has been a flood of service-learning research in the 1990s and most studies have focused on the impact of service-learning programs on students. Unfortunately, this research is weakest in both concept and methodology precisely in the areas where we need the most guidance if we are to design powerful academic programs. We know that service has something important to contribute to personal and social development; we have less reason to be confident that uniting it with academic work improves learning. Intellectual outcomes — knowledge, cognitive development, problem-solving skills, and transfer of learning — are at the heart of the school and college mission and yet we know relatively little about how they are affected by service-learning. So while we will touch on the many student outcomes documented in the literature, the primary focus of our recommendations for future research will address gaps in our understanding of the academic learning goals of service-learning and the instructional processes needed to achieve these goals.

What We Know

Just in the past ten years there have been several national studies that address the impact of service-learning on students (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gray, Ondaatje, Geschwind, Fricker, Goldman, Kaganoff, Robyn, Sundt, Vogelsang, & Klein, 1999; Melchior, 1997) and dozens of smaller scale studies (Alt & Medrich, 1994; Andersen, 1999; Eyler, Giles & Gray, 1999). Most of these have explored the impact of service-learning on such personal qualities as efficacy, interpersonal skills, reduced stereotyping, and on social responsibility or sense of commitment to future service. This body of research consistently shows a small but positive effect of service-learning on these outcomes. Studies which have examined the impact of quality differences in service-learning have found that programs with more opportunity for reflection, substantive links between coursework and service, and ethnic and cultural diversity have a stronger impact (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gray et al, 1999; Mabry, 1998). While we lack longitudinal studies that show a link between academic service-learning and later civic involvement, there is evidence in the youth development literature (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997), as well as the work of Astin, Sax and Avalos (1999) in higher education, that volunteer service leads to subsequent community involvement. The mediating factor appears to be the development of civic identity, i.e. the personal efficacy and social responsibility that are the outcomes of both community service and service-learning.

The effect of service-learning on cognitive outcomes has been less well studied and relatively little attention has been given to defining learning outcomes that would be expected to be enhanced by service participation. Most of the reports of learning are based on student self reports or faculty testimony (Eyler, Giles & Gray, 1999). Where attempts have been made to use grades as measures of learning, the evidence is mixed (Berson & Younkin, 1996; Markus, Howard & King, 1993; Miller, 1994; Kendrick, 1996). In some cases where positive results are reported the method of calculating grades has differed for treatment and comparison students so that results can be attributed to different standards or ‘extra credit’ for service rather than increased learning (Balazadeh, 1996; Sugar & Livosky, 1988). In other studies, it is hard to disentangle the effects