

Service-Learning: A Positive Impact on Student Achievement

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Background

Service-learning is a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study. A growing body of research is reinforcing high quality service-learning as a means to increase student achievement, boost school attendance, and inspire greater interest in course material. The following is a brief compilation of findings from studies and surveys on the connection between service-learning and student achievement.

Research Summaries

- “Students who participated in service-learning were found to have **scored higher** than nonparticipating students in several studies, particularly in social studies, writing, and English/language arts. They were found to be more **cognitively engaged** and to be more motivated to learn. Studies show great promise for service-learning as an avenue for **increasing achievement** among alternative school students and other students considered “at risk” of school failure.’ⁱ
- “Service-learning, when implemented with high quality, yields statistically significant impacts on students’ **academic achievement**, civic engagement, acquisition of leadership skills, and personal/social development.”ⁱⁱ
- “Participants also do **better on tests** in the subject matter (like mathematics or writing) to which the service-learning project is aligned. For example, environmental projects are associated with **higher scores** in science and projects with research are associated with better writing skills.”ⁱⁱⁱ
- A summary of three major evaluations of service-learning initiatives Serve-America, Learn and Serve America, and Active Citizenship Today (ACT) documents the following:
 - a **reduction in absenteeism** for high-school and middle school participants;
 - an **increase in homework hours** for middle school participants;
 - positive impacts on school engagement, **math and science grades, and core GPA**; and
 - a positive impact on **social studies grades** for middle school participants.^{iv}

Findings from Individual Studies and Surveys

- “Service-learning was significantly correlated with **higher [Indiana standardized test] scores** for both Math and English in the third and tenth grades.”^v
- “Those who took part in service reported **higher high school grades**. Mostly as were reported by 72 percent of the past Service-Learning participants, 68 percent of the Service Only participants, and 45 percent of No Service participants.”^{vi}

- “Based on comparisons of [Michigan Educational Assessment Program] achievement scores across two school years, fifth grade service-learning participants had significantly **higher writing, social studies, and science scores** than students in the comparison group.”^{vii}
- “Sixth-grade students that participated in the service-learning approach had statistically significantly **higher scores** on the Terra Nova, a standardized test...”^{viii}
- “...97.9% of the teachers agreed that as a result of the service-learning project, **students learned more** than they would have through regular classroom instruction...” (in a 2000-2001 survey of Wisconsin teachers who brought service-learning projects into their classrooms through Learn and Serve America mini-grants)^{ix}
- “...[S]uggests that service-learning projects have an effect on students’ perception of the course material’s usefulness, and that higher perceived usefulness, along with higher perceived ease of subject, leads to more **favorable attitudes toward the course** and stronger intentions for future use of its material.”^x
- “...[C]onnecting service with academic course material does indeed enhance the **development of cognitive skills.**”^{xi}
- “...[S]ervice-learning classes had a larger **decrease in male absences...**”^{xii}
- “...[S]ervice-learning classes had a **smaller increase in disciplinary referrals...**”^{xiii}
- “...[S]ervice-learning students indicated positive attitudes in predicting future service involvement and student opinions of growth personally, socially, and academically.”^{xiv}
- “Service participation shows significant positive effects on all 11 outcome measures: **academic performance** (GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college. These findings directly replicate a number of recent studies using different samples and methodologies...Performing service as part of a course (service learning) adds significantly to the benefits associated with community service for all outcomes except interpersonal skills, self-efficacy and leadership.”^{xv}
- “The findings also underscore the importance of the **reciprocal influence of ‘academics’ and ‘service,’** where the quality of service is enhanced by directly applying the academic course material to the service experience, and where learning is enhanced by drawing on the service experience to understand the course content.”^{xvi}
- “Impacts of service-learning were shared relatively equally by a wide range of youth (white and minority, male and female, educationally and economically disadvantaged, etc.). However, **non-white and educationally disadvantaged participants** did show significantly more **positive impacts on academic performance** than their complementary subgroup.”^{xvii}

- More than 95% of the program participants reported that they were satisfied with their experience and that the service they performed was helpful to the community. Through the surveys and interviews, participants made clear that their service experience had been meaningful and had helped them to gain an increased understanding of their community, their **academic work**, and themselves.^{xviii}

“Overall, students who participated in classrooms where service-learning was a requirement achieved **higher final course grades** and reported greater satisfaction with the course, the instructor, the reading assignments and the grading system. Faculty members reported that class discussions were more stimulating, the sections more vital in terms of student involvement, the students seemed more **academically challenged**, more **motivated to learn** and seemed to exert more effort in the course.”^{xix}

ⁱ Billig, S. H. (2004) *Heads, Hearts, and Hands: The Research on K-12 Service-Learning*. Denver, CO: RMC Research Corporation. Available online at http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/Billig_Article2.pdf

ⁱⁱ Billig, S.H. (2004) *Using Evidence to Make the Case for Service-Learning as an Academic Achievement Intervention in K-12 Schools*. Denver, CO: RMC Research Corporation. Available online at <http://nslp.convio.net/site/DocServer/caseforsl.doc?docID=106>

ⁱⁱⁱ Billig, S.H. (2005) *Celebrating the Good News: Research Shows Service-Learning Works!* Denver, CO: RMC Research Corporation.

^{iv} Melchior, A. & Bailis, L.N. (2002) “Impact of service-learning on civic attitudes and behaviors of middle and high school youth: Findings from three national evaluations”. In A. Furco & S. Billig (Eds.), *Advances in Service-Learning Research: Volume 1: The Essence of the Pedagogy*. Abstract available online at <http://www.learningindeed.org/research/slresearch/abstracts.html>

^v Civic Literacy Project (2000). *Standardized Test Scores Improve with Service-Learning*, Bloomington, IN: Civic Literacy Project.

^{vi} Martin, S., Neal, M., Kielsmeier, J.C., and Crossley, A. (2006), “The Impact of Service-Learning on Transitions to Adulthood,” *Growing to Greatness 2006*. St. Paul, MN: National Youth Leadership Council. http://www.nylc.org/rc_downloadfile.cfm?moid=14:633&property=download&mode=download

^{vii} Klute, M. M., & Billig, S. H. (2002). *The impact of service-learning on MEAP: A large-scale study of Michigan Learn and Serve grantees*. Denver, CO: RMC Research. Research brief available online at <http://www.rmcdenver.com/michigan.pdf>

^{viii} Meyer, S., & Billig, S. H. (2003). *Evaluation of Need in Deed*. Denver, CO: RMC Research Corporation.

^{ix} Kirkham, M. (2001). *Sustaining service-learning in Wisconsin: What principals, teachers, and students say about service-learning, 2000–2001*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Available online at <http://dpi.wi.gov/fsctp/pdf/slsustain.pdf>

^x Evangelopoulos, N., Sidorova, A, and Riolli, L. (2003) “Can Service-Learning Help Students Appreciate an Unpopular Course?: A Theoretical Framework”. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, v.9(2), Winter 2003, 15-24. Abstract available online at http://www.servicelearning.org/lib_svcs/lib_cat/index.php?library_id=5860

^{xi} Vogelgesang, L.J. and Astin, A.W. (2000) “Comparing the Effects of Community Service and Service-Learning”. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Vol. 7, Fall 2000, pages 25-34. Abstract available online at http://www.servicelearning.org/lib_svcs/lib_cat/index.php?library_id=4231

^{xii} Aquila, F.D., Bradley, L.R., Dodd, J., and Jones-Ward, C. (2004) *Three-Year Longitudinal Service-Learning Research Study: Preliminary Findings*. Overland Park, KS: Johnson County Community College. Available online at http://www.glenninstitute.org/glenn/scholars_content/paper13.pdf

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} Astin, A.W., Vogelgesang, L.J., Ikeda, E.K., and Yee, J.A. (2000) *How Service Learning Affects Students*. Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles. Available online at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/PDFs/HSLAS/HSLAS.PDF>

^{xvi} *Ibid.*

^{xvii} The Center for Human Resources, Brandeis University. (1999). *Summary Report: National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University. Available online at <http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/26/LSReport.pdf>

^{xviii} *Ibid.*

^{xix} Berson, J.S. (1997) *A Study Of The Effects Of A Service-Learning Experience On Student Success At An Urban Community College* (Doctoral Dissertation.) Florida International University. Abstract available at http://www.servicelearning.org/filemanager/download/sincecomposure/Recent_SL_DissertationsIII_edited_1-05.pdf