Summary of Research on Service-Learning in K-12 and Higher Education

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Overview

A review of leading journals in the fields of education, community engagement, experiential learning, and higher education reveals more than 1,000 studies that have examined impacts of service-learning in K-12 and higher education. The overwhelming majority of these studies (about 85%) are investigations that have examined the effects on student participants (a.k.a. service-learners or providers of service through service-learning).

Most the student impact-focused studies examined the impact of service-learning on students' academic achievement and educational success.

Studies have also investigated impacts of service-learning on teachers/faculty, educational institutions, and the communities being served. These studies have found service-learning improves teachers' relationships with students, teacher retention, improved school climate, and a broad range of positive effects on the communities served. *(See reference section.)*

The collection of published studies differs in sample sizes, scope (i.e., single site versus multiple sites), methodology (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, mixed), design (e.g., experimental, quasi-experimental, case study, pre-post, post-only, etc.), and focus (e.g., assessing different student outcomes from different types of service-learning experiences). Approximately one quarter of the studies employed an experimental or quasi-experimental design.

In addition to individual studies, several meta-analyses have been conducted that calculated the overall effect of a series of independent studies that investigated similar outcomes. See list below. This report focuses on the impacts of service-learning on students.

Effects on Students

Regarding the effects of service-learning on students, the overall conclusions from experimental and quasi-experimental research studies are the following:

(1) The preponderance of evidence points to modest to strong positive effects for service-learners across five domains:

1. **Academic Achievement and Educational Success**
   o Increased subject matter content learning (Science, Mathematics, Social Studies, Communications, Psychology, Nursing, other areas)
   o Greater engagement in academic learning,
   o Increased school persistence and graduation among underrepresented students (i.e., first generation college students), students with disabilities, and first-year college students
   o Greater satisfaction with school
   o Improved attitudes toward school and learning
   o Increased attendance in middle and high school
   o Improved academic skills such as writing, time management, exam performance, and critical thinking

2. **Civic Knowledge and Skills**
   o Increased interest and motivation to engagement in community service
   o Increased civic efficacy
   o Greater civic commitment and competence
   o Increased students' knowledge about government
   o Increased sense of civic responsibility
   o Increased civic leadership

3. **Personal Development**
   o Increased perseverance with challenging tasks
   o Increased self-esteem
   o Greater sense of belonging
   o Increased transcultural self-efficacy
   o Increased sense of personal agency
   o Increased social responsibility and character development
   o Improved ethical decision-making

4. **Social and Interpersonal Development**
   o Increased intercultural competence
   o Communication adaptability and competence
   o Improved relationships with peers
   o Stronger conflict resolution skills
   o More positive relationships with teachers

5. **Career Development**
   o Opportunities to explore career options

      o Development of career-related skills (e.g., teamwork, project management-formulation of project plans, interview skills)

      o Stronger conflict resolution skills

(2) Not all service-learning experiences are equal. Effects for students are strongest when the service-learning experiences include the following:

- A strong linkage between the service activities student conduct and the academic curriculum in which students are studying;
- Systematic reflection activities in which students analyze the impact of their service, the academic, the social issue, etc.;
- Students' engagement in service activities that are meaningful to the students *and* the community;
- Student voice in organizing and implementing the service-learning experiences;
- Adequate student preparation to engage in community-based service activities; and
- Sufficient duration of service experiences.

(3) Service-learning is one of several pedagogies considered to be "high impact" instructional practices that promote high student engagement in learning and educational tasks. (See Kuh, 2008)

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