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Summary of Major Findings: Learn and Serve America, Higher Education

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SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS: LEARN AND SERVE AMERICA, HIGHER EDUCATION

This report provides an overview of results from the first year evaluation of Learn and Serve America, Higher Education (LSAHE), an initiative of the Corporation for National Service (CNS). The evaluation assessed the impacts of LSAHE on communities, students, and institutions in fiscal year 1995.

BACKGROUND

LSAHE emphasizes the links between service and academic learning by encouraging undergraduate and graduate students to participate in community service. CNS has identified three goals for LSAHE:

- (1) to engage students in meeting the unmet educational, public safety, human, and environmental needs of communities;
- (2) to enhance students' academic learning, their sense of social responsibility, and their civic skills; and
- (3) to increase the number, quality, and sustainability of opportunities for students to serve in the nation's institutions of higher education.

CNS works toward these goals by awarding funds through a national competition to higher education institutions and community-based organizations. In fiscal year 1995, CNS distributed approximately \$9.5 million. Programs focused on any or all of four priority areas of service established by CNS: education, human needs, public safety, and environment. LSAHE also emphasizes *service-learning* as opposed to community service or volunteerism. A distinguishing characteristic of service-learning is its emphasis on the development of *both* service recipients and service providers.

EVALUATION OF LSAHE

The National and Community Service Trust Act (1993) requires CNS to conduct a national evaluation of LSAHE. CNS contracted with RAND to conduct this study. RAND then established a subcontract with the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) to help evaluate LSAHE impacts on student volunteers.

The full evaluation will assess the first three years of LSAHE (the 1995 through 1997 fiscal years), using both quantitative and qualitative methods. During the first year, RAND and UCLA implemented four data collection strategies:

- (1) Administration of an Annual Accomplishments Survey to LSAHE program directors to obtain descriptive information about grantee activities. 341 program directors returned the survey, for a 78 percent response rate;
- (2) Administration of a Community Impact Survey to a random sample of community organizations involved in LSAHE to obtain community perceptions of LSAHE effectiveness. 443 organizations returned the survey, for a 69 percent response rate;
- (3) Administration of a UCLA Follow-up Survey of undergraduate students enrolled in schools with LSAHE grants to compare participants and nonparticipants in service-learning. Over 3,400 students from 42 institutions, representing 36 percent of direct grantees, returned the survey;
- (4) A series of 10 site visits to grantees to explore LSAHE impacts on institutions and assess implementation of LSAHE across diverse sites.

WHAT WORK WAS PERFORMED BY LSAHE PROGRAMS?

The Annual Accomplishments Survey and site visits indicate that LSAHE grantees successfully implemented an array of capacity building and direct service activities. Capacity building activities provide training and assistance designed to improve program quality and sustainability and to increase the number of students engaged in service. Direct service activities involve students as volunteers in community settings. Major findings about LSAHE activities are summarized below.

- Subgranting greatly extended the reach of LSAHE. Twenty-six (26) of 116 LSAHE grantees used their awards to administer subgrants to other institutions, some of whom then awarded subsubgrants. In this way, over 500 colleges and universities, or about one in every seven colleges and universities nationwide, participated in LSAHE.
- A typical LSAHE program included both capacity building and direct service activities. All of those responding to the Annual Accomplishments Survey devoted at least some time to building the higher education sector's capacity for service. Three quarters integrated service-learning into the curriculum, creating over 1,000 new courses. Two-thirds provided technical assistance on topics such as how to develop service-learning courses or how to link higher education institutions and community organizations. Other capacity building activities included developing publications (50 percent of respondents), and building clearinghouses, databases or other information resources (38 percent). Slightly over three-quarters (78

percent) of Annual Accomplishments Survey respondents also included direct service in their LSAHE program.

- Most grantees involved in direct service worked in multiple service areas, indicative of the breadth of service activities within individual institutions. On average, programs responding to the Annual Accomplishments Survey worked in three different areas of service. Three-quarters (75 percent) involved students in service to promote school success among K-12 youth, and slightly over half (53 percent) involved students in helping homeless, impoverished, elderly, or disabled people. Others provided services to enhance neighborhood environments (38 percent), foster school readiness and literacy (37 percent), improve health (37 percent), prevent crime (31 percent), and improve natural environments (24 percent). Respondents were least likely to work in the area of crime control (18 percent).
- Sample accomplishments in various service areas include: (1) student volunteers provided assistance to over 1,800 K-12 teachers; (2) student volunteers served 487 soup kitchens or shelters and organized almost 200 food and clothing drives; (3) volunteers taught 180 conflict mediation courses and mediated over 250 disputes; and (4) volunteers tested over 200 buildings for environmental hazards.

WHAT WERE LSAHE IMPACTS ON SERVICE RECIPIENTS?

During the spring of 1995, staff from 443 community agencies and schools completed the Community Impact Survey, which assessed the contributions of student volunteers to their communities. Ten site visits extended and confirmed the survey data. Major findings include:

- Respondents perceived the student volunteers from LSAHE institutions as highly effective in promoting the goals of the community organizations they served. Almost three quarters (71 percent) of the community organizations responding to the survey reported that the student volunteers enabled them to increase the quality of their services. Additionally, 61 percent increased the intensity of services provided (i.e., the amount of services per recipient), 59 percent increased the variety of services offered, and 52 percent were able to serve more people. Moreover, responses indicate that student volunteers supplemented rather than replaced other volunteer labor. The student volunteers had little impact upon the number and workload of paid staff.
- Student volunteers from LSAHE institutions were perceived as highly effective in serving the needs of clients. Respondents to the Community Impact Survey assigned students high ratings for their contributions in the areas of education, health, public safety, and

environment. For example, student volunteers received mean ratings above 4.0 on a five-point scale (indicating a "very high" level of effectiveness) for their efforts in "improving students' school achievement," "promoting children's readiness for school," "improving conditions for low-income or homeless people," and "conserving or restoring natural habitats."

- Staff from community organizations assessed the student volunteers as especially skilled in working with youth. Respondents reported the greatest strength of student volunteers to be their enthusiasm and interpersonal skills. They perceived the students' greatest weakness to be lack of time for volunteer work due to competing demands of school, employment, and extracurricular activities.
- Respondents rated student volunteers from LSAHE institutions as substantially more effective than other volunteers, including volunteers from non-LSAHE colleges and universities. They rated the student volunteers as equal in effectiveness to paid staff.
- Almost all community organization respondents (97 percent) indicated that they would like to work with student volunteers again if given the opportunity. Similarly, 92 percent responded that the benefits of working with student volunteers outweighed the problems and costs.

WHAT WERE LSAHE IMPACTS ON INSTITUTIONS?

The Annual Accomplishments and Community Impact surveys reveal increasing support and capacity for service activities within higher education institutions.

- LSAHE colleges and universities support service-learning in a variety of ways. Almost all the institutions responding to the Annual Accomplishments Survey (92 percent) have integrated service into curriculum. Three-quarters (75 percent) house a volunteer or service center. Two-thirds (68 percent) offer rewards or recognition for student and faculty involvement in service. On the other hand, only 10 percent require service to graduate, and less than one-third (31 percent) include service in the core curriculum.
- The implementation of LSAHE was associated with growing support for service-learning. One-third (33 percent) of the institutions responding to the Annual Accomplishments Survey developed service-learning courses for the first time in 1994-95. Close to one third of responding institutions (30 percent) established faculty committees on service-learning, and an equal number began offering service-learning course development funds to faculty.
- The implementation of LSAHE was associated with improving relations between higher education institutions and community

organizations. Community organizations responding to the Community Impact Survey reported increasing cooperation and collaboration with LSAHE institutions through such activities as joint service projects and participation on committees.

WHAT WERE LSAHE IMPACTS ON SERVICE PROVIDERS?

The UCLA Follow-up Survey indicates that students who participated in community service showed greater gains in civic responsibility, academic achievement, and life skills compared to those who did not. Even stronger evidence of the impact of service participation emerges from multivariate, longitudinal analyses conducted before and after students' service experiences. Such analyses enable investigators to control for factors that might predispose students to participate in service. Two caveats are needed, however, in interpreting these results. First, as with all quasi-experimental research, it is possible that one or more potentially biasing variables have not been controlled. Second, the observed effects of service are modest in size, although consistently positive.

- Simple comparisons of Follow-up Survey responses between service participants and nonparticipants indicate that service participants exhibited a greater sense of civic responsibility (e.g., commitment to serving the community), higher levels of academic achievement (e.g., academic self-concept, grades, degree aspirations), and more growth in life skills (e.g., leadership self-confidence, interpersonal skills).
- Comparisons of change over time between the pre-test (Freshman Survey) and Follow-up Survey responses of service participants and nonparticipants indicate that, in most categories of student development, service participants experienced larger relative gains than did nonparticipants. For example, service participants showed larger net gains than nonparticipants in their commitment to helping others and level of social self-confidence. Further, whereas service participants displayed increases in their commitment to influencing social values and influencing the political structure, nonparticipants reported declines in these areas.
- Multivariate results indicate that every one of 35 outcome measures was favorably influenced by engagement in some form of service work, even after controlling for a wide variety of input and environmental factors. Service participation positively affected students' commitment to serving their communities, helping others in difficulty, and promoting racial understanding. A similar pattern was observed for the development of such life skills as leadership ability, social self-confidence, critical thinking, and conflict resolution. Service participation also had positive effects on

academic development, including grades, time devoted to academic endeavors, degree aspirations, and self-reported gains in knowledge. Thus, participating in service activities substantially enhanced students' development in the areas of civic responsibility, life skills, and academics.

CONCLUSION

At the end of its first year, LSAHE grantees were actively engaged in a wide variety of capacity building and direct service activities. Moreover, results indicate that these activities were achieving the three major goals of LSAHE. First, community organizations strongly valued the contributions of student volunteers and perceived the students as highly effective in meeting both organizational and client needs. Second, institutions were increasing their capacity and support for service-learning, particularly by developing new service-learning courses. Relations between higher education institutions and community organizations also improved during the year. Third, participation in service was associated with gains in student learning and development. Students participating in service showed greater increases in civic responsibility, academic achievement, and life skills than did nonparticipating students.