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Research Matters

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TALK IT UP

ADVOCATING FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

ISSUE EIGHT

The *Talk It Up* series helps Partnership members advocate effectively for service-learning. Through this series, our members have shared their perspectives and advice. To read earlier issues, go to <http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/publications/archives.cfm?archive=tiu>

—Anthony Welch, chair of the National Service-Learning Partnership Board of Directors

RESEARCH MATTERS

By Dr. Shelley H. Billig

Many people are attracted to service-learning because they see what it does for students, schools, and communities. Students are more engaged in their studies, schools are revitalized, with a new sense of mission and focus, and community members, energized by working with students on service-learning projects, are more supportive of young people and their schools.

This rosy picture is the reality in some settings with well-implemented service-learning, but too often this is not the case. In fact, much service-learning practice is uneven in quality, and research shows that low-quality service-learning has little impact.

Research has a critical role to play in increasing effective service-learning practice. Specifically, research results and robust outcomes can help all service-learning advocates—school administrators, teachers, parents, students, community members, and policymakers—make the case that service-learning should be an integral part of every student's schooling every year. To achieve this, service-learning advocates must know and use what existing research says about high-quality service-learning; they must speak out about and support robust research on service learning; and they must cite research findings accurately.

1 Know what existing research says about high-quality service-learning. Many teachers know a great deal about sound service-learning practice, but current research knowledge can tell us more definitively what works. For instance, at present, research findings indicate that four components of service-learning practice play an important role in students achieving significant and positive outcomes through their service-learning experiences:

- Direct contact between service-learning students and the community members involved in service-learning projects,

- High-quality student reflection on their work and learning,
- A direct connection between students' service-learning experiences, the academic curriculum students must master, and the standards they must meet, and
- An "intentional" design and implementation, linking service-learning experiences with the student learning they are meant to foster.

Current research knowledge suggests that students must have direct contact with people in the settings that are part of their service-learning inquiry and action. For example, a project on homelessness will be much more powerful if students have real contact with residents and service providers in a shelter. When set up wisely, such relationships can strengthen students' learning, civic mindedness, and sense of efficacy. By way of contrast, students graphing the number of cans of food they collected in a food drive is not likely to be an effective service-learning experience.

Current research also indicates that opportunities for reflection are an essential element of high-quality service-learning practice. Students learn more when an adult, such as a teacher, helps them see the big picture as well as examine their individual and collective interpretations of their experiences. Students then have a "minds-on," as well as a "hands-on," experience.

Research shows that connecting service-learning to curriculum and standards is critical for students to perform better on state assessments. While this statement seems obvious, this connection does not happen often enough. When service-learning inquiry and action are not integrated into core academic curriculum aligned with standards, students may still benefit in many ways, but what they have learned may not show up on important accountability measures. In this age of No Child Left Behind, many educators would like to see the

impact of students' service-learning participation reflected in their test scores, and this is not so difficult if these experiences are connected to curriculum standards.

Research also suggests that **intentional design and implementation** matter if students are to achieve specified learning gains through their service-learning experiences. Curriculum content as well as service-learning activities must be organized around the desired learning. Again, while this may seem obvious, it does not always happen. Thus, a teacher who wants to strengthen students' understanding of American history, while boosting their civic participation skills, might combine a study of the Great Depression with a service project on addressing one aspect of the effects of a local recession. A service-learning project's design must also take into account that *how* students develop and carry out a project can have as significant an impact on their developing civic participation skills as what they actually do to serve. In other words, students' civic skills grow when their service-learning activities involve decision-making, leadership, and team-work opportunities.

Research has a critical role to play in increasing service-learning practice.

The overarching point here is that research findings already tell us a certain amount about what works, for what purpose, and under what conditions. We must spread and use this knowledge so that it leads to better practice, which in turn supports stronger student learning—better practice means better outcomes.

2 Support robust research. Advocates must speak out about the importance of high-quality studies of service-learning practice so that funds for rigorous research increase. Currently, funding for service-learning research is limited, and only a few well-designed national studies are underway. For the most part, the service-learning field must rely on research conducted through small studies and project evaluations. This limitation is serious because many policymakers want “scientifically-based research” to guide educators' decisions about teaching methods and curriculum. This type of research uses experimental or quasi-experimental designs to compare outcomes for students participating in service-learning with outcomes for students who do not. Such studies are expensive to conduct, requiring more financial resources than service-learning researchers have typically had—one reason that advocacy on behalf of more and better research is so important.

Besides being expensive, scientifically-based research requires a big commitment of time and energy on the part of participants. Researchers are sensitive to the burden that such studies pose, but substantial participation—that is, yielding sufficient response rates and candor on the part of educators and active consent on the part of parents—is critical to ensure rigorous service-learning research and relevant findings. Teachers and administrators who are service-learning advocates can help by volunteering for studies, and if asked, by speaking their minds openly and asking parents for their support to ensure high-quality data.

3 Cite research findings accurately. Proponents often “overclaim” what service-learning can do. Service-learning is a wonderful approach to teaching, but it is not a magic bullet for teaching everything. It is not the best strategy, for example, if direct instruction is more appropriate, as well as less costly and time-consuming.

Service-learning is a value-added teaching method, with benefits for students' social/personal development, civic engagement, and academic achievement, but only when it is well implemented and conforms to what we know about best-practice. Service-learning can revitalize a school or district, but only when combined with excellent teaching, a positive school culture, and effective school leadership. Thus, service-learning can produce robust and statistically significant outcomes in many areas, but advocates' claims must be in line with what the research shows.

There is currently a body of research to bolster the argument that service-learning should be part of every student's education, as well as to improve service-learning practice. The field will advance when service-learning practitioners use research findings to hone their practice and when they participate actively in rigorous service-learning studies. It will also advance when all service-learning advocates support more and better research and speak accurately about what service-learning can really claim to accomplish.

For summaries of recent research, please go to http://www.service-learningpartnership.org/service_learning/research.cfm, or <http://www.rmcdenver.com>. For more information on service-learning quality, go to <http://servicelearningtool.com>.

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For more information, visit <http://www.service-learningpartnership.org>