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Community Service & Service Learning Initiatives in Independent Schools

A study conducted by the National Association of Independent Schools thanks to generous funding by the Surdna Foundation, Inc. Researched and prepared by Deborah Genzer, Consultant and Director of Community Service Learning, San Francisco University High School, California.

Executive Summary

During the 1996-97 academic year, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) researched independent school community service and service learning initiatives, thanks to a generous grant from the Surdna Foundation. NAIS conducted a survey of its 963 member schools in the United States, followed by site visits to eight of the respondents. Deborah Genzer, an independent school community service learning coordinator, worked as a consultant throughout the project. The following are the issues addressed by this study, with italicized highlights of findings.

1) The prevalence of community service programs and service learning initiatives in independent schools

Highlights of findings: 87.5% of responding independent schools (505 of 577) have a community service or service learning program, with another 9.9% (57 respondents) answering yes to the question, "are you (your school) thinking of starting a community service or service learning program?" Therefore 97.4% (562 respondents) either have a program or are thinking of adding one. This study indicates that it is standard practice for independent schools to involve their students in service to the community.

2) Standard practices of community service programs and service learning initiatives

Highlights of findings: Three types of programs are found in independent schools: community service, co-curricular service learning, and academically-based service learning. For the purposes of this study, "*Community service*" simply means volunteering done in the community." The emphasis is on action, or what students are doing. A typical community service program might involve students in tutoring elementary school children or serving meals at a soup kitchen. It may be required or voluntary, but it is usually unpaid help.

Service learning however "is the blending of both service and learning goals. This is done in such a way that both occur and are enriched by each other. Most prominently, service learning includes a strong reflective component where students utilize higher order thinking skills to make sense of and extend the formal learning from the service experience." For the purposes of this study, a distinction is drawn between two types of service learning. *Co-curricular service learning* exists when the school provides opportunities to extend students' learning, through preparation and reflection which occur outside the academic curriculum. Most often *co-curricular service learning* is in the form of a non-academic course such as "Introduction to Community Service," or in the form of a final reflection added to an hourly service requirement.

Academically-based service learning exists when the service occurs as an integral part of an academic class, and is designed to extend classroom learning as well as provide a needed service to the community. A service learning program, for example, may involve students in the same activity of serving a meal in a soup kitchen, but would provide structured classroom activities in which students think critically about related issues such as welfare policy and social justice. In the broader field of education, service learning has come to mean this academically-based service learning initiative.

Academically-based service learning initiatives are found in 26.2% (151 responding schools). And though the survey was not able to generate the precise number of schools that have co-curricular service learning, the results indicate that at least 61.9% (357 of respondents) have co-curricular service learning. Just 12.0% (69 respondents) indicate that they have community service programs only.

3) "Excellence" in community service and service learning initiatives

Highlights of the findings: This report attempts to compare current independent school practices with guidelines for "high quality" initiatives that combine service and learning. The *high quality service learning* criteria are defined as follows by Service Learning 2000, a well respected leader in providing training and support for schools involved in service learning:

Integrated Learning: When integrated learning occurs, the service activity enhances the important knowledge, value or skill goals of the class or school.

High Service: Work that is considered high service meets a real need in the community (as defined by the community), is age appropriate, well-organized and gets something done.

Student Voice: Students should be engaged in as many aspects of project planning as possible.

Reflection: Reflection should take place before (to prepare), during (to troubleshoot), and after (to process) service activities.

Collaboration: All stakeholders (including administrators, agencies, businesses, community members, parents, students, teachers) are involved in planning, execution and evaluation.

Independent school programs seem strong in meeting a real need in the community, in that working in homeless shelters, tutoring in public schools and visiting elders are the most common projects. Another 79.9% (461 respondents) have student voice in selecting service projects, but no more than 51.0% (294 respondents) involve students in leadership roles. *Reflection* occurs most frequently during service (57.7%; 333 respondents) and after service (61.0%; 352 respondents). Partnership or *collaboration* with the community is not rated as a strong goal. Respondents averaged 4.6 on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing strong disagreement and 7 representing strong agreement with the assertion, "We seek to form partnerships with agencies, for example, agencies participate in designing our service experiences as well as related reflection and education." This stance is further supported by respondents' answers to other questions in the survey. *Collaboration* with agencies is found with 66.6% (384 respondents) involving agencies in supervision, yet just 51.0% (294 respondents) involve agencies in the design of projects. Deeper partnership involving agencies in reflection or teaching is limited to a maximum of 31.5% (182 respondents). The issue of integrated learning will be discussed in the next section. *This study suggests that independent schools could raise the quality of their community service and service learning initiatives by increasing reflection, collaboration, and student voice.*

4) Citizenship and community service/service learning programs

Highlights of findings: The "high quality" definition provided by Service Learning 2000 does not identify specific learning outcomes for students, and in its "Integrated Learning" section, leaves it to the school to decide what the "important knowledge, value or skills" should be.

Yet independent schools have identified citizenship development as a priority. (Interestingly, this dovetails with the most current national trend in service learning.) The survey results indicate that, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), independent schools average a 6.4 in response to the question: "A central goal of involving our students in community service or service learning is to help them develop the skills and attitudes of responsible citizenship."

However, closer examination of both the survey results and the site visit data suggests that independent schools have not done substantive thinking about what citizenship means. While specific goals given for programs tend to cluster around the ideas of making a difference and meeting community needs, few such programs generally teach the skills of analyzing community needs (28.6%; 165 respondents), public discourse with diverse populations about how to best meet those needs (14.6%; 84 respondents) or analysis of public policy (9.7%; 56 respondents).

5) Examples of high quality service learning initiatives in independent schools

Highlights of the findings: This study suggests that there are innovative examples of rigorous, academically-based service learning initiatives that have the enthusiastic endorsement of students and teachers in independent schools. The most common request during site visits was for these academic models.

- A middle school English class in Palo Alto, California, which seeks to teach writing through the theme of friendship, involves students in writing personal stories with younger children who attend a local public school.
- A middle school social studies class in Providence, Rhode Island, during a unit on ancient Greek democracy, challenged students to register voters who belong to groups that tend to have low rates of registration. This class led to rave reviews by students, as expressed by one student who said, "Out of all the projects I've done, I really remember this one; it really teaches the problems of democracy ..."
- A high school environmental science class collaborated on the restoration of the Runnins River in Massachusetts, and on policy change related to its protection. The school won an award for its efforts.
- A high school advanced placement Spanish in class in Andover, Massachusetts involves students in tutoring Spanish speaking community members for their high school equivalency exams, as part of a larger effort to give citizens in the local community more voice. As the teacher of this course stated enthusiastically, "Students speak more [Spanish] in one class [tutoring] than in one semester [in the classroom]; and they have a cultural exchange."
- A high school ethics class in Bronx, New York performs service and explores related ethical issues, as part of a four-year, comprehensive service learning curriculum. Graduates from this school have continued to be involved as supervisors for the school's service projects.

6) Key factors in the development of high quality service learning initiatives

Highlights of the findings:

Community service coordinator positions are key. Site visit data suggest that independent schools are on the right track by designating a community service coordinator, these faculty members continually strive to raise the quality of their programs. Survey data and site visits indicate that they educate themselves about the issues in their field, often helping to create information networks throughout their regions. Further, community service coordinators often add reflection to students' community service experiences, and initiate the school's first academically based service learning courses. Perhaps just as importantly, they provide needed community contacts and inspiration for other teachers interested in service learning.

Administrative support is key. Interviews with school administrators showed that they seem to have little familiarity with the importance of reflection or with the concept of service learning. This lack of information often leads to barriers in which decisions, about schedule for example, do not take these needs into account. One headmaster was supportive in another way - by inviting dialogue with parents about service learning. The school found that after allowing parents to voice concerns, and the head to respond, service learning courses enjoy strong parental support.

7) Challenges to the development of quality service learning initiatives

Highlights of the findings: In response to the question, "Which of the following issues are the most challenging to community service or service learning," of the sixteen choices, the top answers among respondents were:

- "Transportation for students" 37.8% (218 responses)
- "Time coordinator spends in program" 37.3% (215 responses). Of the eight schools visited with model academically-based service learning initiatives, four had full-time coordinators and three of those full-time coordinators had at least one assistant.
- "Time students spend doing service" 37.8% (218 responses)

For schools engaged in academically-based service learning, 37.1% (56 of 151 schools with service learning) responded that "*Time for faculty to plan*" was another top challenge.

Recommendations

- The quality of independent school students' community service experiences can be enhanced by providing students with opportunities for reflection, collaboration and voice in the planning.
- Schools would benefit from taking a fresh look at their educational goals for community service and service learning initiatives, specifically with regard to educating students for citizenship.
- Schools are encouraged to allocate the needed resources to the development of quality programs, through the appropriate allocation of time and access to transportation.
- It would be beneficial for schools to fund professional development opportunities for community service coordinators, administrators, and interested faculty.
- Provide more professional development opportunities tailored to the specific needs of independent school community service and service learning initiatives. A program of collection and dissemination of high quality information on service learning in independent schools could have a powerful impact.
- Provide funding for the development of model service learning curricula.
- Inform school administrators, through NAIS publications and professional development events, about the results of this study.
- Conduct further research on community service and service learning in independent schools.
- Provide funding for schools and communities to create collaborations.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is excellent community service and service learning work being done in independent schools across the country. However, the programs that facilitate this work are typically under-resourced: short of staffing, transportation, time and perhaps most critically, short of thoughtful support about the importance and direction of their work. For the success of high quality initiatives to be ensured, schools must, at least, provide students with a curricular context for the service work they are doing. And while the current independent school approach seems to be to build this curriculum outside academic courses, this approach needs closer examination as to its benefits and limitations. This study is also a call for independent schools to explore the potential of service learning in academic classes as a step toward taking more leadership in citizenship education.

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