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## Awarding Credit for Service: A Study Conducted for the Corporation for National Service

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## **AWARDING CREDIT FOR SERVICE**

A STUDY CONDUCTED FOR THE CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL SERVICE

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March 1998

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## AWARDING CREDIT FOR SERVICE

### Introduction

The expansion of service-learning and service programs throughout the educational system in the United States continues at a strong rate. Bolstered by the national initiatives sponsored by the Corporation for National Service (CNS) and by state movements such as the mandated graduation requirement for service in Maryland, many people are interested in where and in how this reform movement is being implemented. Specifically, they are interested in understanding what counts for service, how service is monitored, and how service counts or is credited in school districts. A central issue focuses on the criteria school systems and school personnel use to determine that service-learning is worthy of credit in an educational enterprise.

In order to learn more about this issue, the CNS asked three universities previously involved in the study of service-learning to do a short study to gather preliminary information about how school systems award credit for service-learning. The Universities of Minnesota and Massachusetts (at Amherst), as well as Clemson University, all agreed to develop an instrument to survey school districts within their regions and to also conduct follow-up phone interviews with personnel directly involved in awarding credit for service to address the issue. The instrument was developed in September 1997 (and piloted with a few participants in each region) and then the study was implemented between October

and December 1997. What is reported here are results of data collected by faculty and staff at the three institutions.

### Information about the sample

Between the three universities involved, 86 surveys were mailed to school districts within their regions. Size of the districts ranged from 300 to 65,000 students. Rural, urban, and suburban schools were all represented in the sample. Most districts had at least two years experience with service-learning, with several having more than five years of program development. Of the surveys mailed, 41 were returned, representing a return rate of 46%. Suggestions from the surveys provided an additional 19 people (primarily teachers and administrators) who were knowledgeable about service-learning and who were subsequently interviewed by phone. The interview covered the same items on the written survey, with interviewers asking for more details than was provided on the form.

Data reported here represents both the written reports and the personal interviews conducted for the study. Analysis of the data draws from the total of all responses, with  $n=60$ .

### Presentation of Data

The survey sent to the districts and used as a question schedule for the personal interviews contained six multiple response questions dealing with issues of awarding credit and three open-ended questions that focused on criteria for credit and problems/concerns resulting from attempts to award credit (see Appendix A). Data presented are first broken

down by each question, reporting percentages of choices, followed by summaries of comments concerning the final three questions.

### Questions

Question #1: In response to the question that asked how service-learning offerings were organized in the district, respondents answered:

- 72% said they were school-wide programs
- 48% reported that they were offered through individual classes
- 33% said they were district wide programs
- 30% reported community-based initiatives ( originating with community-based organizations)
- 3% reported they were either electives or offered through some other form

Percentages exceed 100% because people gave multiple responses. Thus, initiatives in these districts were located at more than a single school; they were in fact school wide or district-wide efforts. Slightly less than one-third were primarily classroom-based, existing as a single entity within the district.

Question #2: When asked whether service-learning was required or mandated as a requirement:

- approximately 60% said no
- 42% indicated a yes response

Of the mandated requirements, over 50% said it was a requirement for a class, with fewer than 40% indicating it was a requirement for graduation by a larger unit such as the

school or the school district. Thus, mandatory requirements appear to occur more for courses than at school or district levels.

Question #3: This question asked if the service-learning was done independently by the student, in conjunction with contact with guidance from staff in the school, or through reflective activities conducted as part of regularly offered courses. Answers from the field were:

- 57% reported they did their work through regularly offered classes
- 58% reported independent work with guidance from teachers or staff
- 27% said it was done completely on an independent basis.

While a majority of programs find students working independently on their service activities, more than half report that teachers and staff monitor the student learning as part of their service experiences.

Question #4: This question focused on who determines the value of the service experience in the credit awarding process. Survey and interview responses broke down as follows:

- 30% said only teachers determine the value
- 45% reported that teachers, staff, and students were involved in evaluating the credit worthiness
- 7% said non-teaching staff
- 17% reported that others, such as school boards, determined criteria for awarding credit.

Results here suggest the majority of districts and programs have teachers, in combination with students, judge the value of the learning and determine credit issued for the learning.

Questions 5: Criteria used to actually establish the credibility of the service work was the focus of this question. Surveys and interviews revealed that:

- 30% of the programs used only hours to determine credit
- 38% used hours as part of a class
- 32% used learning related to academic classes without any determination of hours.

Thus, the majority of respondents reported that hours, both without and with classroom learning, was the primary criterion for awarding credit. One-third reported that learning associated with a class was the suitable criteria for awarding credit.

Both of the results report promising prospects for the field.

Question 6: As a follow-up to the last question, issues were raised as to who determined the criteria for awarding the credit for service. Responses indicated that:

- 53% of the decisions were made by teachers
- 32% of the decisions were made by school administrators
- 17% of the decisions were made by students
- 13% were made by school boards
- 7% were determined by parents

Clearly, teachers help determine the educational value of the service, with administrators also acknowledged as active participants in the process. In some cases, students and parents are able to pass judgment on the value of the service activities. Thus, professional educators remain in charge of determining the educational suitability of any service-

learning activity, as might be expected, given the credentialing requirement for credit issuance in most states.

Question 7: This open-ended question asked respondents to describe the three or four things they look for in awarding credit for service. While the answers covered a variety of topics and issues, certain patterns emerged based on the frequency of responses (that could be categorized).

- The most frequently mentioned criterion for credit was time or hours spent on the initiative. This is not unexpected, since even in traditional classrooms the amount of credit awarded is based on seat time (for the Carnegie unit), with 0.5 unit equivalent to approximately 70-75 hours of in-class experiences (220 minutes per week x 20 weeks for secondary schools), plus an undetermined amount of homework outside of class. Although credit is based on the learning that takes place in the course, demonstrated through tests and other measures, it is approximated by the number of hours actually spent in the classroom. While not the only measure, service-learning credit seems to be awarded using time spent in the community and/or in processing the community experiences as one of the important factors in determining completion.
- The second most frequent factor was student self-evaluation. Respondents felt that student involvement in the evaluation process was critical to determining what was actually learned from the service experience. This makes good sense because student experiences are frequently unique or different from others in the same class, so individual evaluation is one of the only ways to measure each student's growth and understanding.

- The third most frequently mentioned element for determining credit was the existence of a reflective component. The range of responses included everything from reflecting on the experience, to reflecting on the relationship of the experience to academic study, to written reflective pieces, to thinking about the quality of the experience, or the impact of the service on the recipient and the person providing the service. Thus, the criteria valued was all about the factors and variables that connect the learning with the doing -- making the mental relationships between the service and the learning.
- The fourth criterion used to measure the worthiness of awarding credit was expressed as consequences, outcomes, and/or products of the effort. This ranged from changes in the perceptions and understandings of students, to changes in the community, to simply meeting one's objectives. Responses also included such areas as demonstrating academic skills or growth in scholarship. One teacher even described using a pre/post test scenario as a method to measure growth .

Question # 8: This question asked respondents to raise other problems or issues in awarding credit for service-learning in school-based programs. The responses were again quite varied, and focused on some key concerns in the world of service and schooling.

Several people were concerned about the definition of service-learning and conveying what is meant by the term to others. This concern was expressed in such areas as teachers giving credit for service when others thought the program was not service-learning. There was fear this would impair the image of experiential learning programs that were trying to ensure there was "legitimate learning" taking place, worthy of academic credit.

Other issues concerned quality control. Several people discussed the problems inherent with different people doing the evaluation. Often community members provided feedback on the kind and quality of work and learning done by students through their service experiences. Frequently the community members had little training or guidance in how to assess both the service and learning, and this led some to conclude that the evaluation of learning could possibly lack consistency and standardization.

A related issue involved concerns over documentation of work. Occasionally students would not keep journals or portfolios as written products of their service activities. When it came time to evaluate the effort, it was uncomfortable for teachers and/or students to pass judgment in any systematic way on the value of the service or the learning connected to it.

Another issue raised was the fact that service-learning credits did not often count for college entrance or on grade point averages. They were considered extra or elective courses that lacked the academic substance necessary to qualify as a “real” class. The rigor, skills, and knowledge required in Physics, English, and Government was considered different (and more difficult) than anything learned by doing or experience. One of the definitions offered for “academic” learning is “of theoretical, not practical value (Shumer, 1994).” For some, the notion that service-learning is about experiential or practical learning, excludes it from being considered “academic,” or focused on theory. One respondent said,

The students see it [service-learning class] as under-structured, and they underestimate the experience. They blow it off - because it's not a real class to them like the other classes.

What is perceived to be academic learning and what is worthy of academic credit are formidable issues in understanding how and why academic credit is awarded for service activities.

Many people agreed that issues of transportation and liability, the traditional nemesis of service and community-based programs, interfered with the awarding of academic credit because these common barriers prevented service programs from being offered to all students, especially those without their own transportation. Often, service-learning programs are offered as optional because schools cannot guarantee transportation or do not want to cover all students for potential risks in activities away from the school, where school personnel do not have direct control over student conduct. One person captured the feeling by simply stating, "Transportation is a major problem."

Question #9: This question dealt with remaining issues or concerns regarding awarding credit for service-learning. In many ways, this question sought to probe individual's perceptions about things they left out of Question 8; to give them another chance to discuss other concerns about the process of granting credit. As expected, there were repeats of Question 8, plus some additional concerns over other items.

Several responses included concerns for safety and age appropriateness of activities. Some teachers were concerned that students had to be supervised to and from their service sites, and that something could happen to jeopardize their security or safety.

Others mentioned that activities still needed to be suitable for the age level of the students, and this was not always the case, especially in the elementary grades.

There was concern for continued staff development. Some mentioned that on-going staff development, especially in helping teachers to establish a link between service and the learning to determine academic credit, was a critical part of the improvement process. Failure on the part of some schools or districts to provide good in-service and staff development led people to voice concerns over the issue as it relates to academic credit -- that not all teachers knew how to grade consistently to award credit. It seems there were questions about how to measure student learning and how the process necessarily applied to other situations. Service credit was going to have to be addressed as a dilemma between time, process, and outcome, three important aspects of any educational endeavor.

Another topic raised was the use of rubrics as guides for credit awarding processes. Some felt that the development of such structures would help teachers to evaluate service experiences more uniformly and provide suitable benchmarks by which to measure learning and credit. Assistance in producing such frameworks could come from several levels -- the point was that someone had to initiate the move to create such structures.

In a related area, respondents wondered how the use of state graduation standard frameworks could be integrated into the credit process. It seemed only natural that as states develop curricular and graduation requirements that the learning associated with service activities would have a clear connection to these state initiatives. Some

states, such as Minnesota, have guidelines both for graduation and service-learning, while those southern and northern states sampled had specific graduation standards that addressed both service-learning and a host of applied academic skills. The primary concern was how these two movements, service-learning and graduation standards, were going to be combined.

Another issue raised was how to both recruit students and solicit the support of parents. Several people who responded thought that service-learning was not widely supported by students enrolled in highly academic programs and subsequently it would be difficult to garner parental support for such efforts. This is a restatement of an earlier concern about the level of learning in service programs compared to more “rigorous” academic classes. The level of learning and academic quality in Physics and Calculus are perceived to be different and more challenging than that found in service-learning, vocational education, or other applied subjects. Many colleges and universities around the country do not count courses that have “applied” learning as an outcome or process. Thus, recruiting students for service-learning initiatives, where credit is given for the course, is perceived by some to be an uphill battle to enlist all students in such applied programs.

Another issue raised related to awarding credit was the lack of state recognition for implementation of service-learning programs. Such reluctance to highlight programs again reinforced the notion that credits earned through service were not as valuable as other academic programs. The individual wanted to see state scholarships for service and acknowledgment by state agencies about the value of the service initiatives.

Still another individual mentioned the difficulty in some situations for monitoring the learning through service. The comment was, “ all activities are voluntary, on Saturdays,” so there was no opportunity to observe and supervise the learning by school staff during regular working hours. This person thought that learning outside of regular school hours presented a dilemma for assessing quality of learning, and thus, undermined the ability of teachers to really know what students were actually doing in their service experiences. Certainly students could write about the experiences, but there would be no way of verifying the learning unless an outside person corroborated the impact and behavior, and those individuals would not be certified teachers who knew what the standards of learning were for the school or the district.

### Discussion

Results of this survey and these interviews present both a promising and critical picture of how and why credit is awarded for service-learning. On the one hand, professional educators should be pleased that the majority of respondents indicated that the basis for awarding credit was very much in sync with other forms of academic credit in school systems.

- Like the standard Carnegie unit, credit was commonly awarded based on the amount of time expected to be expended on the learning. People paid attention to the hours required for service activities.
- In addition, teachers and administrators felt that credit was also awarded based on other factors, including evaluation systems (both student self evaluation and classroom

evaluation). Teachers did some of the evaluation, but they frequently included students and community sponsors in the process, trying to get information from a variety of sources about the quality of learning.

- It was teachers, primarily, who determined the criteria for awarding the credit, as many claim it should be
- The existence of reflective components in programs and the measurement of outcomes and products rounded out the major criteria for awarding credit.

All of these components include important elements of any good learning system -- the expectation that sufficient time will be spent on the learning, and the quality of the learning will be measured through a variety of sources, including evaluation of both outcomes and process. Students are an important partner in this process, which allows for the flexibility demanded by service programs that often have students doing different things in their service experiences.

This good news is balanced by concerns that service-learning is still somewhat misunderstood by educational practitioners.

- Many still believe that learning outside the classroom is not as rigorous or challenging as traditional classroom-based instruction. Hence credit awarded for service is not as “real” as credit in academic areas. Recruiting students from strong academic programs is more difficult, and gaining support from parents of high achieving students is also a challenge.
- Because of the variety of service experiences, it is often difficult to standardize the credit awarding process, with some students learning a great deal and others learning

relatively little. Input from community members, students, and teachers can often be based on different criteria, so credit awarded is not uniform in its meaning or demonstrated achievement.

- There is still lack of understanding about what constitutes service-learning. This confuses the credit awarding process because teachers, students, and community sponsors are sometimes unclear as to what to measure -- time, learning, service delivered, impact on community, etc. These are all important components, yet none constitute the entire service-learning process by themselves.

Given these positive and sometimes conflicted findings indicates that the service-learning field is still growing and evolving in both its theory and practice. While there is no single point of consensus, growth in attitude and approach to issues of awarding academic credit for service-learning is continuing to mature. We have learned from this survey and series of interviews that teachers are important players in the credit awarding process, just as they are in traditional educational programs. While credit is awarded primarily for hours worked, there is a growing interest in the connection between service and learning for academic subjects. Practitioners are becoming more concerned about professional approaches to assessment of credit and learning, identifying student and program evaluation processes, reflective components, and analysis of outcomes and products as critical elements that make for good service-learning systems. Such interest moves the service-learning field closer to the educational mainstream, because the concerns about learning from service are no different than concerns for measuring learning and awarding credit in more traditional courses. This is not to say that service-learning

programs need to model themselves after standard processes in traditionally run educational institutions. But it does indicate that the focus on measuring learning, a long-standing fundamental process in every educational system, is of paramount importance. Engaging the learning perspective in determining academic credit places service-learning well with the bounds of solid educational practice.

### Implications/Recommendations

While it appears the field of service-learning practitioners is moving toward more serious connections between service and more formal learning in order to award academic credit, there clearly is a need for further study of this issue. The various settings and conditions described in the survey responses and interviews indicates that we need to study the process for awarding credit in more detail. Perhaps following up with some of the districts investigated to do case studies of teachers and schools will provide richer, more illustrative examples of the interaction between process and product, criteria and credit. While respondents provided partial perspectives on how teachers, students, and community members interact to establish what was learned and what impact/effect was achieved, we are unclear as to how practitioners initiate and implement credit awarding/assessment systems. In depth studies of this complex process would help others to understand just how the service leads to learning and the learning leads to credit in courses.

Along with these scenarios, it would be helpful to document how teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members construct rubrics or frameworks by which to measure learning and credit. Many people are still struggling

with the desire to have some kind of recipe or roadmap that lays out the process in more detail. Such structures, like curriculum frameworks, provide guidelines for novices who want to know how to translate the process into practice; how to create the paper trail and the activities that will lead to substantiated learning and defensible awarding of academic credit.

### Conclusion

The preceding survey, interviews, and discussion present a positive view of the efforts by service-learning practitioners to award academic credit based on sound educational principles and effective instructional practice. There is a struggle to define service-learning through practice and to award credit based on demonstrated learning and verifiable activities. The better our understanding of critical concerns related to awarding academic credit for service, the better we will be able to define the field and to improve the substantive practice of service-learning.

# Appendix I

Copy of the Instrument used in this study

## School Districts Survey

Name of Person completing report:

Job responsibility of person completing report:

Name of School District:

Address of District Office:

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

We may want to gather further information through telephone interviews with selected staff, teachers, or community members. Who should we phone in your school district that has first-hand knowledge about awarding credit for service-learning?

*Please indicate their position(s) and provide their phone number(s) here:*

Name \_\_\_\_\_ position \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ position \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ position \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number(s) \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions about service-learning and awarding of credit(s)

1. How are the service-learning or community service offerings in your district organized? *Check all that apply.*

- \_\_\_\_\_ a. individual classroom
- \_\_\_\_\_ b. individual school program
- \_\_\_\_\_ c. district-wide program
- \_\_\_\_\_ d. community-based initiative
- \_\_\_\_\_ e. Other \_\_\_\_\_

2. Is service-learning or community service *required* for any course or graduation purposes?

No \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_

If yes, what is the requirement? Is it a:

- \_\_\_ a. requirement for graduation from district
- \_\_\_ b. requirement at individual schools for graduation
- \_\_\_ c. requirement for specific classes
- \_\_\_ d. Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. Is service-learning or community service:

- \_\_\_ a. Independently done by the student
- \_\_\_ b. Independently done by student but receives guidance from other staff member (school counselor, teacher, etc.)
- \_\_\_ c. Students receive direct and regular guidance and reflection opportunities through a class or in the classroom

4. Who determines whether service activities meet requirements or are worthy of credit? Check all that apply:

- \_\_\_ a. only non-teaching staff-counselor, secretary, or parent volunteer
- \_\_\_ b. only teaching staff for academic courses
- \_\_\_ c. non-teaching staff and/or teaching staff
- \_\_\_ d. Other \_\_\_\_\_

5. By what criteria is service activity deemed worthy of completion or credit?

- \_\_\_ a. solely based on hours completed not attached to a class
- \_\_\_ b. based on hours completed attached to a class plus some kind of report
- \_\_\_ c. based on hours as part of a course or class activity, with an ungraded short report
- \_\_\_ d. not based on hours; based on demonstrated learning connecting service into class/course activity; (grading is based on same criteria as other learning in the course/class/program.)
- \_\_\_ e. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Who determined criteria for awarding credit for service activities? Check all that apply.

- \_\_\_ a. school board
- \_\_\_ b. school administration
- \_\_\_ c. teachers in affected classes or courses
- \_\_\_ d. parents
- \_\_\_ e. students
- \_\_\_ f. Other \_\_\_\_\_

7. In your own words, can you describe the three or four things you look for *in awarding credit* for service-learning: Use an attachment if necessary.

8. Are there problems/issues in awarding credit for service-learning in school-based settings? Please describe those problems/issues and add suggestions for how they should be addressed. Use attachments if necessary.

9. Please describe any other issues that are concerned with issuing or awarding credit for service-learning: Use attachments if necessary.

Thank you for completing this survey instrument.

Please mail the entire document back to us in the enclosed envelope at the address below. We will send a copy of the report, without individual responses to your district as soon as it is completed.

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