



Service-Learning Diversity/Equity Project Research Report Executive Summary (April 2003)

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Introduction

The Service-Learning Diversity/Equity study is designed to document the perspectives of both leaders and practitioners from all sectors of the service-learning field concerning its present state and needs related to diversity and equity. We hope that the findings of the study engage the field in further dialogue and in creation of a national agenda about how to ensure that the field honors its commitment to diversity and equity by demonstrating multicultural/ethnic representation, participation, and practice. Undertaken to examine four areas that relate to this goal, it was designed by the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) in collaboration with the Learning In Deed Initiative.

The areas of study include:

- (1) Leadership
- (2) Missionary Ideology
- (3) Service Across Cultures
- (4) Community-Driven Partnerships

Four goals were identified for the overall project:

- (1) To promote an in-depth exploration of diversity issues and practices
- (2) To provide opportunities for service-learning leaders from diverse constituencies to exchange ideas about diversity, equity and social justice
- (3) To conduct a field-based inquiry on diversity practices
- (4) To host a National Leadership Forum on Diversity/Equity

Using a qualitative research design, we focused on 36, two-hour interviews of individuals who were working in different sectors of the service-learning field. Those interviewed included practitioners, youths, administrators, service-learning organizational leaders, and community organizational leaders. In addition, the project also convened three study circles of service-learning practitioners, youths, organizations, and recognized leaders to discuss in-depth the state of diversity in the field, the four core areas, implications, and recommendations.

The study was informed by the work of two previous studies both by the same investigator, Melinda Fine, Ed.D., entitled "Thoughts on Field Building: A Synthesis of Observations" (2001) and "Creating Inclusive Communities: An Inquiry into Strategies for Pursuing Diversity in the K-12 Service-Learning Field" (2000).

Mission and Culture of the Field

Two of the key components of any organization, field, or movement are its mission and culture. For this reason, we began this study with a series of questions about the central mission of service-learning and the culture of the field. Three major findings emerged from these questions:

Finding #1: There is a fundamental lack of consensus about both the central mission of service-learning and how this mission is tied to issues of social change/justice or charity and helping others.

When asked, "What is the central mission of service-learning?" six themes emerged:

- (1) Civic engagement and citizenship
- (2) Healthy youth development
- (3) Community development
- (4) Improving the field of education and academic outcomes for young people
- (5) Social change
- (6) Understanding the interconnectedness of all people

Finding #2: Diversity and equity are critical to the culture, growth, and progress of the service-learning movement.

Finding #3: The struggle to integrate diversity into the field is not unique to service-learning.

In conclusion, the study found that the overall mission and culture of service-learning varies depending on the philosophical perspective a person or organization holds about the role of service-learning. The findings identified two issues that need further clarification within the service-learning field:

- (1) The mission of service-learning
- (2) The importance of diversity and equity to the growth of the field

Leadership Across the Field

The participants were clear about the importance and impact of the composition of leadership on the service-learning field. The findings point to the complexity of leadership in all aspects of service-learning, and the reasons why the current leadership may not be very diverse.

Finding #1: The majority of respondents perceived the current national leaders to be well educated, and from middle-class backgrounds. Historically, most of the leaders were seen to have been white males, but increasingly, white females were seen as taking positions of leadership.

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The study also found the following:

- People of color are not attracted to service-learning for a number of reasons including economics and a perception that a “missionary ideology” philosophy exists in the field.
- The leadership for the most part, does not reflect the service-learning student population.
- There is great concern that the national service-learning organizations, which publicly represent the philosophy and meaning of service-learning, do not, for the most part, have diversity in their leadership.

Finding #2: Many participants noted that service-learning’s inclusion of people of color, teachers, and students in leadership roles appears to have a “token” philosophy.

Finding #3: Service-learning leadership exists at the national, regional, state, and local levels, and at the local school level, the leadership tends to be more diverse.

Finding #4: Few opportunities appear to exist for fostering new leaders in the field.

Recommended Action Steps:

- (1) Build allies with other “service” and “educational” organizations.
- (2) Create a national leadership mentoring program for the field.
- (3) Organize a Service-Learning Leadership Conference.
- (4) Create tips for recruiting and retaining diverse leaders in the field.

Missionary Ideology

In this report, “missionary ideology” refers to the concept of one group trying to impose their ideas on another group, with little or no consideration of that group’s traditions, beliefs, and needs. It most frequently refers to working cross-culturally— involving groups of different ethnic, cultural, religious or socioeconomic backgrounds.

Finding #1: The degree to which people understand and practice The Essential Elements of Service-Learning (1999) correlates directly with their ability to avoid missionary ideology. Respondents repeatedly commented on the concept of “good practice” and the importance of effective professional development for all who work in this field.

Finding #2: When prejudice or stereotypes have been reinforced, it frequently has occurred around service related to homeless shelters, service in a community other than one’s own, and/or by practitioners early in their practice of service-learning.

The study found that most examples of “missionary ideology” are unintentional and can be avoided through an understanding of good practice. Factors that were mentioned as influencing people to make unintentional mistakes that could be perceived as having a missionary ideology included:



“Diversity and equity are critical to the culture, growth, and progress of the service-learning movement.”

- lack of understanding of the importance of pre-, during- and post-reflection;
- lack of awareness of their own cultural lens;
- lack of professional development/ training before doing service-learning; and,
- dropping certain elements of “good” practice due to perceived lack of time.

Finding #3: It is important to start with service in your own community before partnering with another community. Respondents did not, however, feel that service should be limited to one’s own community.

Finding #4: Respondents felt that certain attitudes/ philosophical perspectives and practices were more likely to foster missionary ideology.

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Attitudes/Philosophical Perspectives That Foster Missionary Ideology

- having an attitude of doing “to” or “for” versus “with”;
- presuming the needs of others without dialogue; and,
- entering a community as an expert as opposed to a learner.

Practices That Foster a Missionary Ideology:

- People serve outside their own community.
- Service-learning is framed as “server” and “served.”
- Service is not thoughtfully planned.
- There is staff or administrative turnover.
- Service is a one-time event.
- Reflection is not understood as core to service-learning.

Finding #5: Respondents felt that missionary ideology is less likely when certain attitudes/philosophical perspectives and practices are present.

Attitudes/Philosophical Perspective That Promote Good Practice:

- Service comes from an asset-based model as opposed to deficit-based.
- Issues of culture, class, race, and power are openly addressed.
- People understand the greater context for their service.

Practices That Support the Essential Elements of Service-Learning:

- Service-learning is framed in the context of reciprocity and exchange.
- Applications for funding include the essential elements of good practice.
- People serve in their own communities.
- Thoughtful planning and reflection are integral to the process.
- Community members are involved in the whole process.
- A shared vision, clear goals, and shared decision making are established among all who are partnering around a service-learning project.

Finding #6: The terms “server” and “served” may bias how people view service-learning.

Finding #7: There is a lack of consensus about the intent of service-learning as a vehicle for social change/social justice exclusively, or as a tool for both charity and social justice.

Finding #8: The role of federal funding for service-learning may have de-politicized service-learning and its potential impact.

Recommendations for Avoiding Missionary Ideology:

- (1) Build awareness of the potential for a missionary ideology approach.
- (2) Examine this phenomenon and identify constructive approaches to avoid it.
- (3) Avoid a “we/they” approach.
- (4) Document positive and negative examples of practice.

Service Across Cultures

There was strong agreement among respondents that more education needed to take place around cultural views of service.

Finding #1: The majority of respondents felt that service as a fundamental ideology is relevant and practiced in some form within most cultures. What varied, however, was the focus of the service, the terms used to describe service, and who renders the service.

- Many notions of service are communal rather than individualistic.
- The terminology used in the service-learning movement may be a block to cross-cultural understanding.
- For some people, culture and faith intersect, and this intersection may expand or influence how they look at service.
- Student voice and ownership may be more challenging for some cultural groups than definitions of service.

Finding #2: Those writing, talking, or providing leadership to the service-learning field have not, for the most part, articulated the connections of service-learning to various cultural values for service.

Finding #3: For first-generation immigrant families, service-learning is a confusing concept when embedded in a school context.

Finding #4: We need to explore more deeply the concepts of “culture” and “service”; both adults and young people need to be a part of these discussions.

Finding #5: Service-learning has the potential to bring many cultures to the table around one project.

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Recommended Action Steps:

- (1) Interview and document cultural traditions related to service.
- (2) Have more and deeper dialogue as a field on this topic.
- (3) Develop parent orientations to service-learning.
- (4) Inform local leaders about service-learning so that they can become advocates.
- (5) Service-learning trainings should include examples that highlight the cultural roots of service.

Community-Driven Partnerships

The two core questions involving community-driven partnerships centered on the relationship between grass-roots organizations and service-learning, and the degree to which community-driven partnerships can enhance diversity in the service-learning field.

Finding #1: Partnerships between community organizations and service-learning programs are key to identifying authentic service projects which address the needs of the community, while promoting and honoring diversity.

Finding #2: Forming and sustaining community-driven partnerships with grass-roots organizations are complex endeavors.

Finding #3: Community-driven partnerships with all levels of community organizations are key factors in helping service-learning be more authentic and diverse.

Recommended Action Steps:

- (1) Rethink the "grass-roots" term.
- (2) Create shared expectations and values for the students and the community.
- (3) Encourage schools to become more familiar with local community organizations.
- (4) Co-create curriculum and projects together with community organizations.
- (5) Increase the effort to educate grass-roots organizations about service-learning.

Overall Conclusions

This report is intended to be a call for further discussion and a catalyst for change in the service-learning field. The report raises many critical questions for the field to consider. These questions can lead us to explore diversity and equity more deeply and to broaden our understanding of how to make the very fiber of service-learning a rich assortment of culturally and ethnically diverse people, cultures, and practices.

References

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