

# Bridging from High School to College: Findings from the 2004 CIRP Freshman Survey

## Growing to Greatness™

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seeks to understand the ways in which young people serve their communities and how that service contributes to their own learning. At UCLA, the Higher Education Research Institute studies college students. For more than 30 years, our Cooperative Institutional Research Program's annual survey of entering college students — The Freshman Survey — has gathered data on students' high school experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values. Recently, the Freshman Survey began incorporating a variable on service as part of a course, offering insights into patterns of participation and outcomes of service-learning.

The national Freshman Survey data presented here reflect the responses of nearly 293,000 students entering college in the fall of 2004. The data are weighted to reflect the population of all first-time, full-time freshmen at four-year institutions.<sup>1</sup>

## Service-Learning and Community Service

Nearly one in three first-year college students attended high schools that had community service requirements for graduation. Students attending private high schools were about three times as likely as those from 'regular' (non-magnet, non-charter) public schools to report a service requirement. Table 1 illustrates the differences in service requirements among high school types.

Is having a community service graduation requirement associated with

higher levels of service-learning<sup>2</sup> participation? Yes. 72.5 percent of students from high schools with community service requirements participated in service as a part of a course in the past year. Among students from high schools without such a requirement, only 44.5 percent participated in service as part of a course. One explanation for this difference is that high schools that have instituted service requirements might incorporate opportunities to fulfill those requirements through coursework.

Table 1  
Service Required Among High School Types

School Type	Percent of Students Reporting Graduation Requirement	Proportion of Students Attending This Institution Type
Public Charter	38.6	1.0
Public Magnet	45.2	2.9
Other Public	21.9	79.4
Private Religious	69.6	11.0
Private Independent	64.8	5.2

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In 2004, 53 percent of entering students reported that they occasionally (37.5 percent) or frequently (15.5 percent) performed community service as part of a course during the past year.

Scholars and educators debate about whether community service should be required. One argument is that requiring volunteer work fails to instill the civic ethic that is a goal of service participation. To truly assess whether this argument holds true, we would need to know both the values and beliefs students hold after high school and information about students before they participated in high-school service, in order to see whether values or beliefs were strengthened or diminished as a result of participation. HERI's longitudinal analyses measure a similar change for the college years, but these data cannot reveal whether a service requirement or service-learn-

ing during high school are associated with a change in beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors.

Service-learning proponents counter that expecting students to serve their communities as part of their course learning moves the argument from one of requiring volunteer work to making a case for rich learning experiences. Again, the best way to test this notion is to collect data both before and after learning experiences. Longitudinal studies are important because we know that students who participate in service-learning differ from their non-participating peers even before engaging in service-learning.

#### Who Participates in High School Service-Learning?

In 2004, 53 percent of entering students reported that they occasionally (37.5 percent) or frequently (15.5 percent) performed community service as part of a course during the past year. Notable differences in patterns of participation exist within this 53 percent. For instance, women (55.9 percent) are more likely than men (49.4 percent) to participate in service-learning. Women (18.1 percent) are also more likely to say they participate in service-learning *frequently* than are men (12.2 percent).

Low- and middle-income students participate in service-learning at comparable rates. Students from high-income families (\$150,000 or more) tend to participate at

progressively higher levels, with just over 59 percent of students at the \$250,000 or higher income level indicating that they participated in high school service-learning. Of course, students from these very high-income families are also more likely to attend private schools, where a community service graduation requirement is relatively common.

The Freshman Survey provides a unique opportunity to gauge whether students with disabilities participate in service-learning at rates similar to students without disabilities. Students reporting hearing, sight, or health-related disabilities participated at the same rate as the overall population (53 percent). Students reporting learning disabilities (3 percent of the cohort) were more likely (56.7 percent) than other students to have participated in high school service-learning.

#### Service-Learning, Beliefs and Behaviors

The Freshman Survey covers a wide range of behaviors, values, and skills for a large, national sample of entering college students. Thus, it offers a unique opportunity to examine beliefs and behaviors associated with service-learning.

#### Service-Learning and Faith

Research on youths (grades K-12) and service-learning does not generally take students' religious preferences and practices into

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Photo: Ann Saylor

account. The Freshman Survey data suggest, however, that students who participate in religious activities are more likely to engage in volunteer activities generally, and in service-learning specifically (57 percent compared to 43 percent, respectively).

Religious *preference* also impacts service-learning participation. 45.6 percent of students who report their religious preference as 'none' report participating in course-based service, compared to 53 percent overall. Among students who express religious preferences, some are more likely than others to participate in service-learning. Among the most likely are students marking Hindu (62.2 percent), Latter Day Saints

(Mormon) (61.9 percent), Roman Catholic (59.0 percent), Islamic (57.6 percent) and Buddhist (56.9 percent).

### Service-Learning and Academic Achievement

Ninety-two percent of respondents in a recent survey of public school principals agree that service-learning positively impacts students' citizenship and civic engagement, and 83 percent believe it positively affects academic achievement (Kielsmeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain & Neal, 2004).

The Freshman Survey data suggest that service-learning participants are indeed more likely than their peers to report high grade-point-averages (GPAs), but it would be premature to conclude that service-learning *leads to* higher grades. As with the faith practices example noted above, one might argue that the reverse is true: higher grades (or religious participation) lead to service-learning participation. A more logical possibility is that another characteristic leads to *both* high grades *and* service-learning participation.

To illustrate this important issue: Women tend to participate in service-learning at higher rates than men. On average, women also report higher GPAs than men. So, does service-learning lead to higher grades, or are average GPAs higher because service-learning participants are

more likely to be women, who have higher GPAs in general?

Although this question can be 'tested' using these data, studying the cumulative grades of the overall cohort is probably not very useful to gauge student learning. Service-learning practitioners and advocates would likely be more concerned with whether students retain particular content or develop selected

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attributes as a result of service-learning. Such questions necessitate studies of a different nature than examining cumulative high school GPAs, which reflect many factors over the high school years. Service-learning research consumers ought to ask whether studies adequately explore the differences among participants that might account for given outcomes.

HERI's recent research suggests that writing and critical thinking skills are strengthened by participating in service-learning. Furthermore, the impact of service-learning on these skills was explained by the fact that students in these courses were participating in reflection activities as part of their service-learning experience (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). This finding underscores the importance of good practices in service-learning, which other studies have explored in depth (e.g., Eyster & Giles, 1999). Billig (2004) summa-

rizes a number of studies, which suggest that service-learning impacts cognitive development among K-12 students as well.

### Service-Learning and Civic Outcomes

#### *Continued Service Participation*

Not surprisingly, students who participate in service-learning are more likely to say there is "some" or "a very good" chance they will participate in some form of volunteer work or community service during college. For men, 61.8 percent of service-learning participants, compared to 44.5 percent of non-participants, thought they would volunteer; for women the figures are 80.4 percent and 68.2 percent, respectively. This habit of volunteering is an important one, for it suggests that educational institutions contribute to the development of a habit of community service.

Of course, we won't know for a few years whether these students who entered college in 2004 actually continue to engage in service activities, but data from earlier cohorts suggests that high school service participation<sup>3</sup> is positively associated with service work in college and beyond. The association is a modest one, signifying that service is one of multiple factors that influence continued service participation (Sax, 2000).

#### *Community Engagement Values*

Entering college students who have participated in service-learning during their last year in high school are more likely to rate as 'very impor-

tant' or 'essential' a number of values reflecting engagement in community, including: becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment, becoming a community leader, helping others, helping to promote racial understanding, influencing social values, and influencing political structures and participating in a community action program.

Again, the 'problem' of what comes first — a commitment to the values or the service-learning experience — arises. It is likely that students who hold these values are more inclined than their peers to engage in a number of activities, including service-learning. Should the conclusion be that service-learning or other experiences don't matter, or that they only reinforce pre-existing beliefs? Previous HERI research explored this question by

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surveying students near the end of their college years. Researchers found that participating in service-learning can strengthen the values listed, even when accounting for students' values at entrance.

## Conclusion

The CIRP data provide a detailed picture of students as they complete high school and enter college. They suggest that students may have unequal opportunities to participate in service-learning (depending upon institutional type) during high school, but they also confirm that some students are more likely than others to participate in service-learning. These differences are important to consider when assessing the impact of service-learning. HERI longitudinal research reveals that service-learning can be powerful during the college years, even when entering student characteristics are accounted for.

HERI researchers view high school completion as a starting point for college and young adulthood. HERI is currently analyzing data from a survey conducted in the summer of 2004, was followed for the second time when the cohort of students that entered college in 1994. The first follow-up, conducted in 1998 near the end of their college careers, asked students questions about their college experiences, including service-learning.

ing. HERI researchers are now in the process of examining the post-college impact of service-learning.<sup>4</sup> **G2G**

1. More detailed information on weighting procedures is available in *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2004* (Sax, Hurtado, Lindholm, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 2004).
2. In the Freshman Survey and in this article, service-learning is defined as participating in community service as part of a course.
3. Note that here I refer to volunteer work in general; we do not have data on high school service-learning for these earlier cohorts.
4. For more information on our current study of post-college outcomes, please visit our website.

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