

Service to Others:

A ‘Gateway’ Asset for School Success and Healthy Development

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Much has been written in recent decades about “gateway drugs” that, if young people start using them, too often lead to more and more risky behaviors and harmful outcomes. But what about the other side of the coin? Are there “gateway assets” to positive outcomes?

New analyses of Search Institute’s research on “developmental assets” suggests that serving others may, in fact, be a “gateway asset” that leads to many other assets and outcomes, including success in school. Indeed, when young people report engaging in the asset of service to others, they are more likely to experience more of the *other* assets over time, and to have more positive outcomes, including school success, because those service experiences are part of an overall web of assets that provide a strong foundation for healthy development.¹

Developmental Assets: A Foundation for Healthy Development

For the past 15 years, Minneapolis-based Search Institute has been developing the framework of 40 developmental assets (shown in Table 1), which are

relationships, opportunities, values, skills, and self-perceptions that help young people succeed in school and other aspects of their lives. Among the developmental assets are service to others, youth as resources, community values youth, and having

Table 1
Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets

External Assets	Internal Assets
<p>Support</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family support 2. Positive family communication 3. Other adult relationships 4. Caring neighborhood 5. Caring school climate* 6. Parent involvement in schooling* <p>Empowerment</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Community values youth* 8. Youth as resources* 9. SERVICE TO OTHERS 10. Safety <p>Boundaries and Expectations</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Family boundaries 12. School boundaries 13. Neighborhood boundaries 14. Adult role models* 15. Positive peer influence* 16. High expectations* <p>Constructive Use of Time</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. Creative activities 18. Youth programs* 19. Religious community* 20. Time at home 	<p>Commitment to Learning</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 21. Achievement motivation* 22. School engagement* 23. Homework 24. Bonding to school* 25. Reading for pleasure <p>Positive Values</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 26. Caring* 27. Equality and social justice* 28. Integrity 29. Honesty 30. Responsibility 31. Restraint <p>Social Competencies</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 32. Planning and decision making* 33. Interpersonal competence* 34. Cultural competence* 35. Resistance skills 36. Peaceful conflict resolution <p>Positive Identity</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 37. Personal power* 38. Self-esteem 39. Sense of purpose* 40. Positive view of personal future*

* The 20 developmental assets that, from a theoretical perspective, could most easily be enhanced through effective service-learning experiences. Copyright © 1997 by Search Institute, 615 First Ave. Northeast, Suite 125, Minneapolis, MN 55413; 800-888-7828. Used with permission. For definitions of each asset as well as additional research and resources related to the asset framework, visit www.search-institute.org.

values such as caring and a commitment to equality and social justice.

Numerous studies have shown the importance of developmental assets for young people's well-being. This relationship holds true across all groups of youths studied, including young people from many racial-ethnic backgrounds, communities of all sizes, and different socioeconomic backgrounds (Sesma & Roehlkepartain, 2003). These associations occur among both adolescents (Scales & Leffert, 2004) and pre-adolescents (Scales, Sesma, & Bolstrom, 2004).

An important principle of developmental assets theory is that a young person's experience of a single asset or handful of assets is rarely sufficient to promote developmental outcomes that are both deep and comprehensive. Young people live in complex worlds of interacting and nested influences involving family, school, peers, and community. Thus, numerous assets working together across many parts of young people's lives have a sustained, significant impact on their developmental paths.

While this holistic approach makes developmental sense, it also strains both theory and common sense to imagine that all 40 of the developmental assets are equally important for all young people and/or for all outcomes. Some assets more than others may be thought of, not only as important in their own right, but as key influences on other assets as well. That is, they may function as "gateway" assets, with their presence making it more likely that young people will experience *additional* assets. Service to others is an example



of this. In fact, service and service-learning theoretically can have positive effects on at least 20 of the developmental assets.

Service to Others: Clustering with Other Assets

A wide variety of research has found positive associations between service, service-learning and other academic and social outcomes. (See Billig, this issue.) And because the connection of service/service-learning to real-world needs and activities makes it an "authentic" form of learning, it may have particular motivational value to those students who are the least engaged with traditional curriculum.

Two Search Institute datasets offer insights into the relationship between service and positive outcomes.² (Because of the academic goals of service-learning, we focus here on the relationship to school success.) Analyses of the aggregate

dataset of 217,000 students found that students who reported serving others at least one hour per week were significantly less likely to report school problems (poor attendance and below average grades) and significantly more likely to report school success (self-report of earning mostly As in school) than those who did not serve others at least one hour per week.³ For example, 25 percent of students who served reported earning mostly As, compared to 19 percent of students who did not serve. At first blush, this difference may not seem impressive, but it means that 32 percent more students who served earned mostly As compared to students who did not serve others.

Because it is linked to actual school records, the longitudinal dataset provides an opportunity to examine relationships to actual grade-point average (GPA). We found that young people who served in middle school had higher grades

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in high school. When earlier grades (the best predictor of later grades, since good students tend to remain good students) are taken into account, however, we found that service to others, by itself, was no longer significant.

While these findings may appear, at first, to imply that service and service-learning do not have the hoped-for influence, the reality is likely more complex, as suggested by several possible explanations. One factor may be the measurement issue. Our measure of self-reported hours spent volunteering does not capture the nature of service performed, the depth of reflection upon those experiences, and other factors related to the quality of service-learning that have been found to affect outcomes in other longitudinal studies (Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003; and Scales, Blyth, Kielsmeier, & Berkas, 2000).

The sustained and cumulative experience of service likely makes more of a difference in longitudinal outcomes as well. In support of this reasoning, we compared two groups of St. Louis Park, Minnesota, students. One group included students who consistently volunteered from middle school in 1997 and 1998, through high school in 2001; and those who did not volunteer in 1997, but did afterwards (“emerging” volunteers). The other group consisted of those who never volunteered, and those who volunteered in 1997, but not again (“fading” volunteers). We found that the consistent and emerging volunteers had significantly higher GPAs in 2001 than those who never volunteered or those who did early, but then stopped.⁴

In addition, it appears that the power of the service-to-others asset actually comes in conjunction with multiple assets working together, not just one asset by itself. An exploratory factor analysis of the 40 developmental assets identified eight clusters of assets, two of which have particularly strong relationships to actual school grades (B+ or higher average) three years later. One of these clusters, which we call “connections to community” included youth programs, religious community, *service to others*, creative activities, reading for pleasure, other adult relationships, and adult role models. For every point higher students scored on this factor in 1998, they were three times more likely than other students to be in the high GPA group in 2001 (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2003).

The second cluster of assets, which we call “norms of responsibility,” includes achievement motivation, school engagement, bonding to school, positive peer influence, restraint, resistance skills, and peaceful conflict resolution. For every point higher students scored in 1998 on this factor, they were twice as likely as other students to be in the high GPA group in 2001.

To understand the power of these findings, remember that previous GPA is almost always found to be the single strongest predictor of later GPA. In this study, for every point higher in 1998 GPA, students were four times more likely to be in the B+ or greater GPA group in 2001. Thus, these two clusters of assets accounted for an impressive 50 percent to 75 percent of the influence of previous GPA — the strongest predictor of all.

These findings lend support to Youniss, McLellan, Su, and Yates’ (1999) suggestion that there is an “integrated youth syndrome” parallel to the syndrome of youth unconventionality described years ago by Jessor and Jessor (1977), in which high-risk behaviors are symptoms of an underlying problem behavior syndrome. Building on this perspective, participation in service reflects not just an isolated positive experience, but may *both be a result and a cause* of connection to society in other ways, signifying an immersion in networks where prosocial and responsible behaviors are expected, modeled, and rewarded. In short, service participation may both result from and contribute to young people’s connection to mutually reinforcing assets across the many contexts of life, all of which add together to enhance developmental paths in a much more significant way collectively than any asset can influence on its own.

Service to Others: A “Gateway Asset”

In addition to the direct, positive contribution that service to others can make as part of a cluster of other assets, the experience of serving others (particularly in an intentional, well-designed service-learning experience) may also make it more likely that students experience many other assets that collectively promote positive developmental outcomes. In this sense, service to others becomes a “gateway” to many resources for healthy development and school success. In Table 1, we placed asterisks by 20 of the 40 developmental assets that, from a theoretical perspective, could be enhanced through effective school-based service-learning experiences — with other assets potentially being addressed through specific activities.

A number of studies suggest the connection of service or service-learning to many other developmental assets. As shown in Display 1, service and service-learning have been found to contribute significantly to outcomes such as: increased altruism and perceived duty to help others, concern for others' welfare, social competence and empathy, increased sense that one can make a difference, increased self-esteem, closer parent-child relationships, and greater sense of personal responsibility (Scales & Leffert, 2004; and Scales, Sesma, and Bolstrom, 2004). Such results link to at least six of the eight asset categories: support, empowerment, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity.

For this article, we examined the relationship between service and all the other assets in the aggregate dataset. As expected, most of the correlations were quite modest, in the .10s and .20s. The strongest relationships (all with coefficients from .20-.30) were between service to others and these eight developmental assets: adult role models, creative activities, youth programs, religious community, reading for pleasure, caring, equality and social justice, and interpersonal competence.

It is noteworthy that the first five of these assets also were among the seven (service and other adult relationships being the other two) in the cluster of assets with the greatest longitudinal contribution to actual grades in the St. Louis Park study. The appearance of these assets together in two different studies and two different analyses suggests that they work

Display 1

Service-Learning Outcomes Connected to Asset Building

Although results vary widely depending on the intensity, quality, and type of service-learning studied, researchers frequently find that many positive changes occur for young people who engage in service to others. Many of these outcomes are related to categories of developmental assets. (See Scales & Leffert, 2004; and Scales, Sesma, & Bolstrom, 2004.)

Asset Category	Areas of Impact of Service-Learning
Support	Positive attitudes toward adults Talking with parents about school
Empowerment	Community involvement as adult Political participation and interest Positive attitudes toward community involvement Positive civic attitudes Belief that one can make a difference in community Leadership positions in community organizations
Commitment to Learning	Reading grades School attendance and performance Commitment to class work Working for good grades
Positive Values	Prosocial and moral reasoning Empathy Personal and social responsibility Perceived duty to help others Altruism Concern for others' welfare Awareness of societal problems
Social Competencies	Self-disclosure Development of mature relationships Social competence outside of school Problem-solving skills
Positive Identity	Self-concept Self-esteem Self-efficacy

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synergistically to shape development across multiple life contexts.

Further evidence of service to others as a gateway asset lies in a longitudinal analysis of the effect of volunteering in 1998 on the total number of assets students reported in 2001 in the St. Louis Park study, which revealed a significant impact of service on the number of assets students reported three years later. For example, 50 percent of servers in 1998 were asset-rich (31 to 40 assets) in 2001, compared to only 33 percent of non-servers who had such high levels of assets three years later. Collectively, these results suggest the validity of conceptualizing service as a gateway asset that helps create a web of development assets in young people's lives.

A Missed Opportunity

We have seen that service is both related to numerous other key developmental assets, and also has significant connections to both current and future positive developmental outcomes for youth, including school success. Finding ways to intentionally weave together service-learning with asset building has additional promise for increasing the potential impact of service-learning.

Display 2

What Asset Building Can Bring to Service-Learning

It's clear that service-learning has great potential to build developmental assets. In addition, an intentional focus on asset building and use of asset-building principles can enrich service-learning. In *An Asset Builder's Guide to Service-Learning*, Roehlkepartain, Bright, and Margolis-Rupp (2000) describe seven perspectives that the developmental assets framework and asset-building principles can offer to service or service-learning. While some are already integral themes in effective service-learning, all can be helpful for reflecting on how service-learning efforts are intentional about adopting a comprehensive asset-building approach.

1. *A relational perspective:* Both asset-building and service are, at their core, about building positive relationships.
2. *An additive perspective:* Multiple exposures to both assets and service is more effective than isolated experiences.
3. *A developmental perspective:* To be most effective, asset building and service begin long before adolescence, accumulating their impact over time.
4. *A multisector perspective:* Service or service-learning that links influences such as schools, congregations, and youth organizations has a greater chance of positively effecting assets throughout young people's ecologies.
5. *A holistic perspective:* Service or service-learning has a greater chance of building the other developmental assets if such impacts are intentionally made explicit as goals of the experience.
6. *A strength-building perspective:* The best service or service-learning builds the assets of both young servers and those being served.
7. *A "laboratory" perspective:* Service or service-learning experiences are the training ground for a life that emphasizes serving others. By linking current experiences with intentions to continue serving, service or service-learning can nurture the prosocial norms and culture that are characteristic of communities that are asset-building and developmentally attentive.

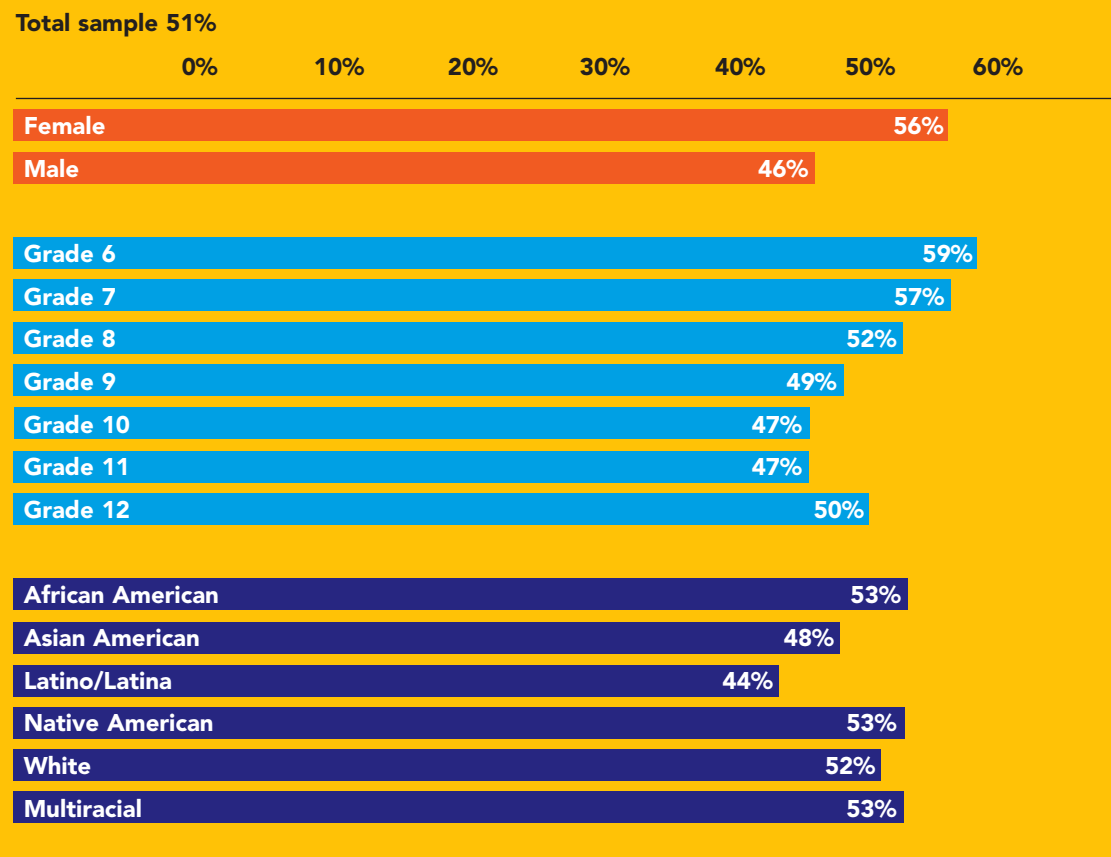
SOURCE: Roehlkepartain, E. C., Bright, T., & Margolis-Rupp, B. (2000). *An asset builder's guide to service-learning*. Minneapolis: Search Institute.

The unfortunate reality, however, is that few young people in this country experience these positive opportunities. At most, only 30 percent to 50 percent of young people volunteer from once a month (Child Trends DataBank, 2003) to an hour a week (Scales & Leffert, 2004). As shown in Figure 1, this involvement is fairly consistent across racial-ethnic groups, varying more by gender and grade.

And though effectively implemented service-learning could have still greater impact than service alone, the new 2004 Growing to Greatness survey of principals (Kielsmeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Neal, 2004) finds that only about 30 percent of schools (22 percent of elementary schools, 30 percent of middle schools, and 45 percent of high schools) provide service-learning. This overall level is statistically the same as the 32 percent of schools reported in a comparable survey in 1998 (Skinner & Chapman, 1999), and it remains far below the aspirations of service-learning advocates.

But the situation is likely even worse than these figures suggest. If Billig's (2004) reasoning is correct, students are only about one-third as likely to participate in service-learning as schools are to provide it. Therefore, only about one in 10 of the nation's students probably experience effective service-learning.

Figure 1
Percentages of 6th- to 12th-Grade Youth Who Report Volunteering at Least One Hour Per Week



SOURCE: Search Institute surveys of 217,000 U.S. middle and high school students during the 1999-2000 school year.

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Much more needs to be done to guide young people onto a path of lifelong service to others. Service plays a significant role as a gateway developmental asset connecting students to numerous other assets, and thereby contributes to school success and other desirable developmental outcomes. The likely result of instilling the service habit in children and youth will be significant long-term benefits to young people, their families, schools, and communities that our current research barely begins to capture.

1. We recognize that there is a substantial difference between the potential impact of community service, and more elaborate and comprehensive *service-learning*. The Search Institute data we draw on in this article are limited to reports of young people's service; we do not know the degree to which the young people in our studies who report volunteering are doing so within a service-learning structure. However, the data Billig cites (2004, this volume) shows that only about 10 percent-25 percent of students likely participate in genuine service-learning.
2. Search Institute's aggregate dataset includes more than 217,000 6th-12th graders from more than 300 U.S. communities who were surveyed during the 1999-2000 school year. The sample also was weighted to align with Census distributions for race/ethnicity and urban residence. The second dataset is made up of longitudinal sample of 370 students from the Minneapolis suburb of St. Louis Park, Minnesota, which followed students from 1998, when they were in grades 7 to 9, to 2001, when they were in grades 10 to 12.
3. Analysis of variance for school problems: $F(1,216,088) = 2745.597$, $p \leq .0001$. Analysis of variance for school success (self-report of getting mostly As in school): $F(1,211,888) = 2373.517$, $p \leq .0001$.
4. Analysis of variance: $F(1, 313) = 4.06$, $p \leq .05$.

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