

National Surveys Link Service-Learning to Civic Engagement

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Two complementary surveys administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Youth Leadership Council document the scope and quality of service and service-learning on a national level. The data reveal connections between service-learning experiences and the level of civic engagement among America's young people.

The Corporation, in collaboration with the U.S. Census Bureau and Independent Sector, implemented a Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement Survey last year, gathering data from American 12- to 18-year-olds on their experiences with school-based service and volunteering. NYLC, with Harris Interactive, surveyed young adults ages 18-28 and analyzed the data according to whether they were alumni of service-learning, participated in service only, or did not participate in any service during their primary and secondary school years. The combination of the two surveys offers an unprecedented panoramic view of the experiences of young people with service-learning projects over the past decade.

A key finding in both surveys is that the quality of the service-learning experience is positively correlated with youth development in the areas of academic achievement, civic engagement, and personal development — such as a sense of personal empowerment, a commitment to being a lifelong learner, and the search for a meaningful career.

Both of the surveys work from the premise that the quality of the service experience makes a significant difference for participants and, therefore, build on the recent findings on the impacts of service-learning by such researchers as Shelley Billig and others. Service-learning is defined as a

combination of attributes, which have been described as the "Essential Elements of Service-Learning."¹ However, this research also has shown that not all of the elements have equal impact.

Among those elements that have been shown to have the most beneficial impacts on youths, the Corporation selected three to measure the quality of the service-learning experience:

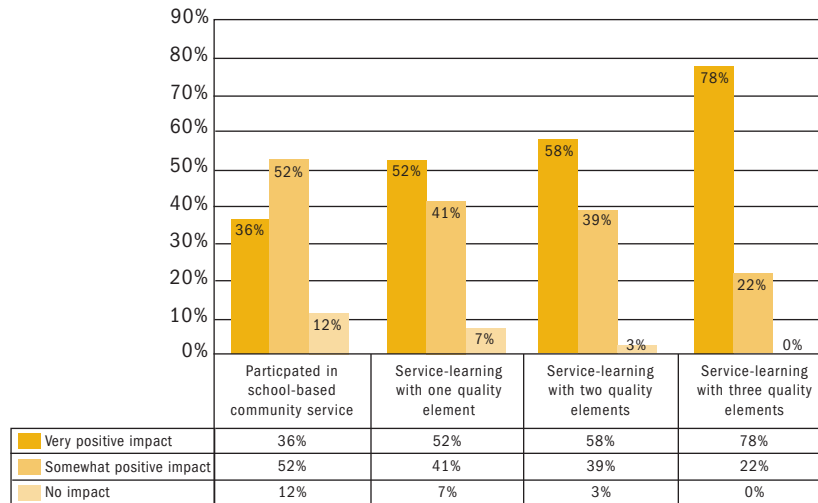
- writing or reflecting on the service experience in class;
- planning the service activity;
- participating in regular service for a semester or longer.

Based on these three elements, the Corporation constructed an index for quality service-learning. When teens participate in class activities with community service that include one or more of the quality elements, their school-based service was categorized as participation in service-learning activities. The more quality elements included in their activities, the higher the quality of their service-learning experience. In this way, five categories for the index were constructed:

- no participation in school-based service;
- participation in school-based service;
- participation in service-learning with one quality element;
- participation in service-learning with two quality elements;
- participation in service-learning with three quality elements.

The quality of the service-learning was found to be positively correlated with youth perceptions of the impact of the participation.

The Impact of School-Based Service Experiences on Youths



The Corporation then used this Index to analyze a number of positive civic and youth development indicators. They found that the higher the quality of the service-learning experience, the more likely youths are to report higher levels of civic engagement and positive youth development, including interest in politics and current events, interest in volunteering and national service, and a personal belief in the ability to make a difference in their community.²

In a similar manner, NYLC's survey identifies service-learning as including reflection (one of the attributes used by the Corporation) and finds that impacts increase significantly depending on whether the student reported having had service only or service-learning. In lieu of longitudinal studies, the NYLC survey offers a retrospective look on the impacts of service and service-learning. Young adults ages 18-28 were asked to reflect on their most meaningful service experiences. Those whose service experiences involved service-learning were

much more likely to recall and recount their experience in greater detail. Service-learning alumni also mentioned that these experiences continue to make an impression on their lives today, long after the experience.

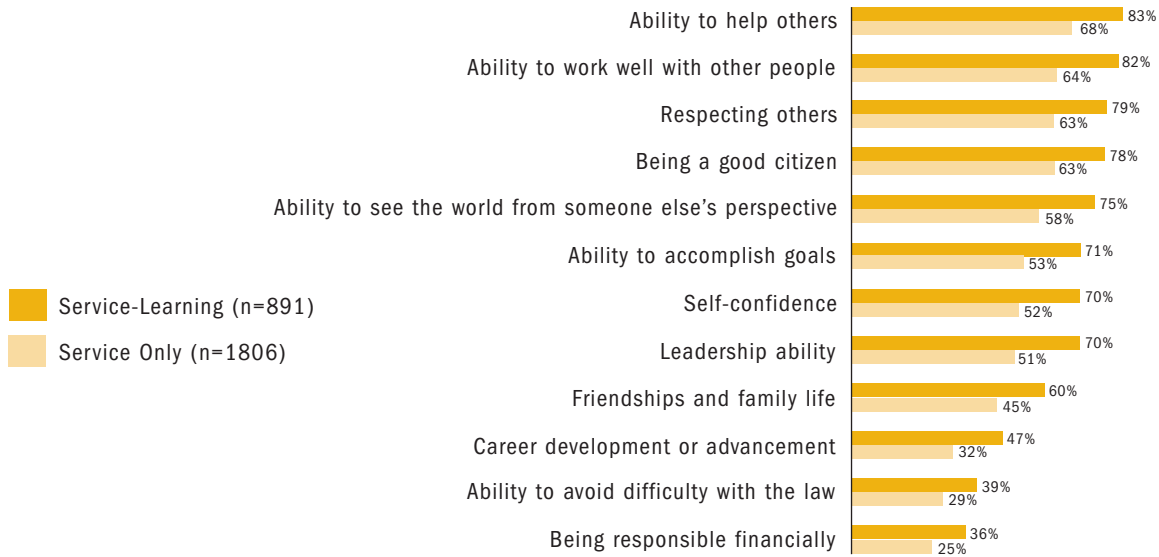
Alumni of K-12 service-learning report that service-learning impacted them in the ways listed on the following chart.

National Service-Learning Conference participant hangs a t-shirt testimonial to abused women and children at the on-site Clothesline service project.



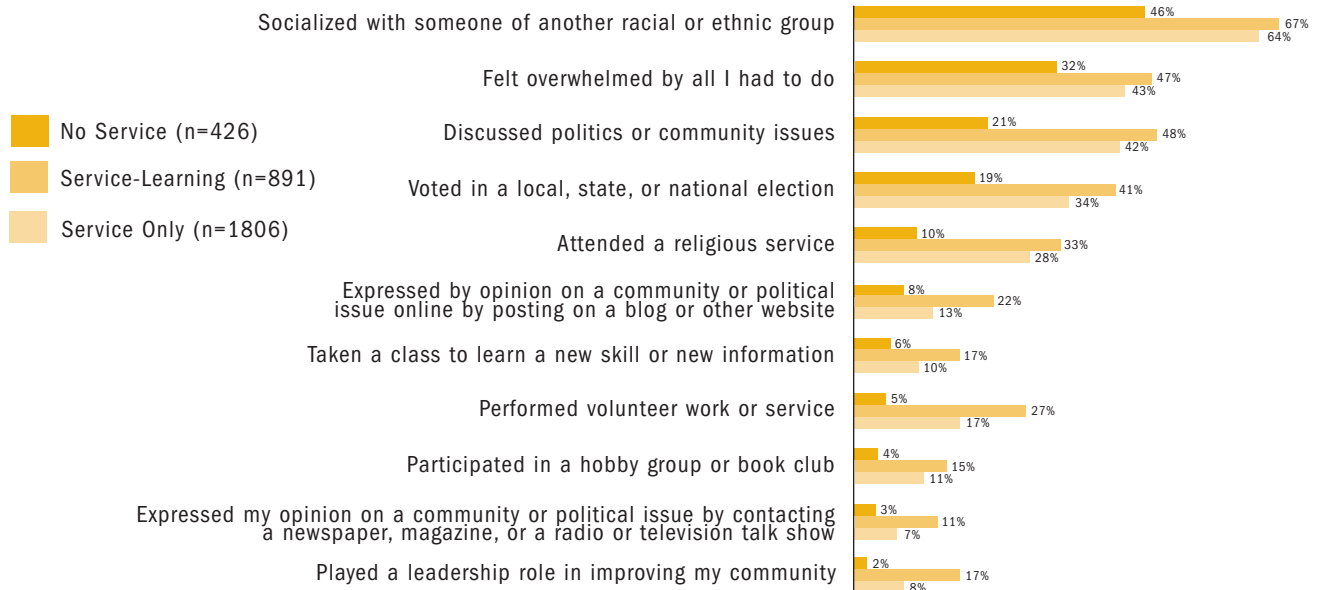
continued ...

Overall, what effects has your service experience had on your life today?



Not only were the 18- to 28-year-olds asked to reflect on their past service-learning, and how they consider themselves to be impacted in the present time by their past experience, but these young adults also were asked about their involvement in academic and civic activities in the past 12 months. Again, the service-learning alumni were far more likely to take on leadership roles and be involved in learning as part of a class

During the past 12 months, how often have you done the following?



Because these surveys utilize definitions of service-learning that incorporate a combination of attributes, the findings allow practitioners to place their own service project on a “quality” continuum of service-learning, as opposed to a simple dichotomy of service-learning and

non-service-learning. Allowing for a continuum more closely models reality, where service-learning projects vary in relation to the degree in which they incorporate different elements. In addition, these surveys contribute to the field's understanding of which attributes of service-learning are correlated with positive academic, civic, and personal development outcomes.

Taken together, the two surveys make a strong case for service-learning. They help set the pathway for further research and documentation of service-learning, thereby deepening our understanding of what it is, how it works, and why it works.

A presentation on the two surveys was held at the Points of Light Conference in June, 2006. Future activities include the presentation of the two surveys at the International Research Conference October 13-16, 2006, in Portland, Ore. NYLC highlighted the survey in *Growing to Greatness 2006* and presented the results at *The 17th Annual National Service-Learning Conference*. Additionally, NYLC is partnering with the Network on Transitions to Adulthood for further studies.



Marybeth Neal, an anthropologist and the NYLC Research Director, is responsible for *Growing to Greatness: The State of Service-Learning Project*. She has been engaged in service-learning research and evaluation since 1994, principally for the State of Minnesota and the Learn and Serve America National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.

The Corporation has used the analysis of the data from their survey to produce a series of reports under the Youth Helping America Series. Two of these reports, "Building Active Citizens: The Role of Social Institutions in Teen Volunteering" and "Educating for Active Citizenship: Service-Learning, School-Based Service, and Youth Civic Engagement" have already been published, while a third report on volunteering and civic engagement among youths from economically disadvantaged circumstances is due to be released this fall. The Corporation is currently in the process of preparing to implement the survey again in the winter of 2007. ■

Growing to Greatness: The State of Service-Learning Project and other related materials can be found at www.nylc.org/g2g. The reports published by the Corporation for National and Community Service can be found at www.nationalservice.gov.

¹ For a full list of the Essential Elements of Service-Learning, see National Service-Learning Cooperative's 1998 "Essential Elements of Service-Learning," St Paul, MN: National Youth Leadership Council.

² The full findings from the analysis of school-based service and service-learning based on the 2005 Youth Volunteering and Civic Engagement Survey can be found in the report entitled "Building Active Citizens: The Role of Social Institutions in Teen Volunteering" at www.nationalservice.gov.



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