

Trends & TudesSM

Keeping you informed of current topics in youth and education research.

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Service-Learning and Transitioning to Adulthood

By Suzanne Martin, Ph.D., Research Manager

Many students today participate in service activities – volunteer activities where they provide direct or indirect service to others, such as fundraising or visiting the elderly. *Service-learning* refers to service activities that are integrated into a curriculum and that require the student to reflect on the activity. Service-learning has been proven beneficial for the youth and communities who participate. However, there is still a need for additional data about the relationship between service-learning and youth-adult transitions.

To examine the hypothesis that service-learning offers the potential to ease the transition to adulthood, as well as to explore other aspects of the transition to adulthood, the St. Paul-based National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) commissioned the Harris Interactive Youth and Education Research Group to conduct a two-part research project on how young adults are making the transition from youth to adulthood, and how service-learning impacts this transition. This project was funded by State Farm®. *The National Survey on Service-Learning and Transitioning to Adulthood*, conducted online in December 2005, is a nationally representative survey of 3,123 U.S. adults aged 18 to 28. The survey included young adults with a range of experience providing direct or indirect service: those with service-learning experience (service-learning youth), those with service experience that does not qualify as service-learning (service-only youth), and those with no service experience at all (no-service youth). To more deeply explore the service-learning experience, focus groups were conducted with 11th and 12th grade U.S. high school students currently involved in service-learning, as well as service-learning alumni ages 18 -24.



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Service-Learning

In the survey, service-learning was defined as those service experiences that required reflection on the service experience. Service-learning could be part of a class or school experience, or it could happen outside of school. Online survey participants classified as service-only youth did some sort of service, but lacked the reflection component. Participants classified as no-service youth did not take part in any form of service. Overall, the survey revealed that 28 percent of young adults (those aged 18 to 28) in the United States have had a service-learning experience before the age of 18. During the focus groups, teens and young adults describe service-learning as mutually beneficial to both the community they were helping and themselves.

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Editorial: Our Take On It

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The young adults we recently surveyed on their transition to adulthood are the leading edge of the Generation Y or Millennial generation. In their book, *Millennials Rising*, Neil Howe and William Strauss argue that this is a generation of “cooperative team players” who “gravitate toward group activity.” Howe and Strauss predict that this generation “will emerge as a new powerhouse, surprising most older people with their activism and determination.”¹ In this context, service becomes a logical expression of this generation’s ethos and service-learning an important educational opportunity.

As this generation matures, attention needs to be paid to cultivating constructive contexts to help young people experience successful transitions to adult responsibilities. Three developmental outcomes that have been found to be particularly significant in the successful transition to adulthood are: (1) completion of high school and postsecondary education,

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Where do we find service-learning?

About one in four young adults (26%) ages 18 to 28 said they took part in service-learning as a youth in a school. The number of young adults who took part in service-learning in a community-based organization is about half that (12%). Young adults were about twice as likely to take part in service-learning as a youth for an organization if they lived in the city (41%) or suburbs (38%) compared to their rural counterparts (20%).

Why do youth take part in service?

A school requirement plays a major role in whether or not a youth will have a service experience. Among young adults who participated in service projects before age 18, 42 percent (59% of service-learning youth and 34% of service-only youth) said the reason they participated in service-learning was to fulfill a requirement.

Interestingly, the top two motivators for service among service-learning youth are to fulfill a requirement (59%) and to help other people (57%), while the two major motivators for service-only youth are to help other people (52%) and to “feel good about myself” (43%).

Most focus group participants noted that they were not initially enthusiastic about the idea of service-learning. They thought it was “uncool.” Once the teens, current service-learning participants and service-learning alumni, began participating in service-learning and felt the impact of helping others, their attitudes changed. Many described the feeling as “addictive” and that they had become “passionate” about their programs.

Service-Learning Experience: Just the Beginning of Being More Active in the Community

Impact on Academics and Life Satisfaction

Academics

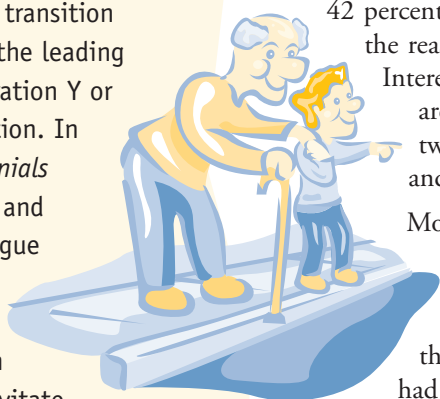
Service-learning taught the focus group participants the value of education – that it is not just about sitting in a classroom and getting a particular grade, but rather that the information can be applied to something meaningful and larger. Many felt that they had a greater understanding of how education could help them in the future than they did prior to participating in service-learning.

“I am understanding why school is important because when I am working on service-learning projects I see where it is applied, like writing a paper or giving a presentation. I am more inspired to continue doing school work because I see where it is coming in handy, that it has a point.”

Those young adults categorized as service-learning youth are more educated than service-only youth and no-service youth. According to the online study, 63 percent of service-learning youth have completed some college, compared to 52 percent of service-only youth and 48 percent of no-service youth. Not only are service-learning youth more educated and more likely to have educational goals, those goals are higher than their service-only and no-service youth counterparts. Over half (58%) of service-learning youth hope to achieve a master’s or doctorate degree.

The educational goals that past service participants aspire to are real. Service-learning (64%) and service-only youth (63%) are most likely to be enrolled in some educational system; their no-service peers (47%) have far lower enrollment. Thirty-five percent of young adults

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(2) development of skills and abilities that are employable, and (3) development of physical and mental health.² Scholars have theorized that the multiple contexts in which an individual resides are determinants of an individual's developmental course.³ In other words, if youth are provided with well-developed contexts, settings in which their unique skills are needed and valued, they may experience those things that will make their transition successful. The context should be enhanced to allow for increased self-esteem, greater social support, educational aspirations, employable skills, experience with a wide variety of ways of living, and increased well-being. Service-learning is an avenue to build such contexts. As Jim Kielsmeier, President & CEO, National Youth Leadership Council writes, "Emerging approaches that authentically engage young people as contributing citizens to communities – especially when linked with well-designed learning and youth development content – are a credible structural response to issues of adolescent dissonance and community decline."⁴

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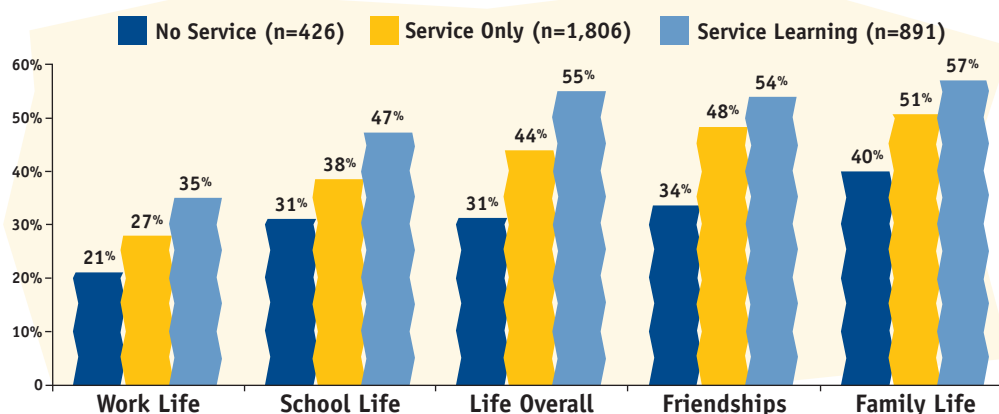
classified as service-learning youth are currently enrolled in a four-year college, compared to 20 percent of their no-service counterparts. Interestingly, if service was a requirement, young adults were more likely to be currently enrolled in an educational setting (68% vs. 55%). Those not enrolled in some education system were not only less educated, but just over half (52%) were somewhat or not at all satisfied with their life.

Life Satisfaction

Young adults who participated in service as a youth were significantly more likely to report being very or extremely satisfied with not only their school life, but expressed the same sentiments about other important aspects of their lives—family, friendships, work, and life overall.

Are you very/extremely satisfied with your...?

Base: All respondents



Source: "The National Survey on Service-Learning and Transitioning to Adulthood," National Youth Leadership Council, fielded online between December 2 and 15, 2005; n= 3,123 U.S. adults aged 18 to 28.

Young adults categorized as service-learning youth were more likely to report being more satisfied with important aspects of their lives than their service-only and no-service youth counterparts.

Civic Involvement, Leadership and Service

Service-learning youth (10%), especially those who have participated in service-learning within an organization (14%) rather than a school (9%), are more likely to do community or national service or to volunteer as a full-time activity for an average of 7.1 months as an adult. Service-learning youth are most likely to report that they plan to continue such involvement within the next five years (39% somewhat/very likely), followed by service-only (25% somewhat/very likely) and no-service youth (19% somewhat/very likely).

One of the overarching messages received by about four in five (78%) service-learning youth was to be a good citizen. Increased civic involvement is apparent in the actions of previous service-learning participants in the past 12 months compared to their no-service counterparts. They are more likely to report discussing politics or community issues (48% vs. 21%), voting (41% vs. 19%), expressing political issues online (22% vs. 8%), and expressing political issues by contacting a newspaper, magazine, or radio or TV talk show (11% vs. 3%).

Service involvement also has long-term effects on civic engagement. For example, service-learning youths report that they value voting and being a community leader more highly than service-only or no-service youth. A majority (70%) of service-learning youths report that service-learning positively affected their leadership ability; which is almost 20 percent higher than their service-only peers.

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Other research on service-learning also affirms that service-learning engages youth academically and civically, and encourages positive character development.⁵ Academically, service-learning students exhibit higher GPAs and enhanced writing and critical-thinking skills.⁶ The Minneapolis-based Search Institute has recorded multiple benefits of service-learning,⁷ including a reduction in the achievement gap between students of high and low socioeconomic status.⁸ In addition, youth participation in prosocial endeavors is correlated to decreased participation in risky behavior and increased education levels.⁹

Adding service-learning in the context of school or community-based organizations creates a win-win situation for all parties involved, and the Millennial generation becomes poised to fulfill the positive predictions.

Reference List

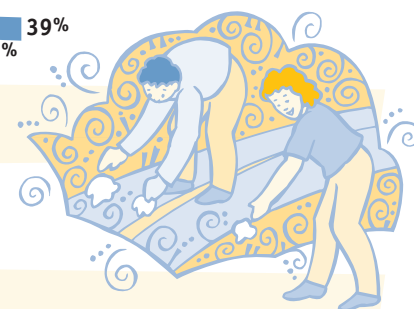
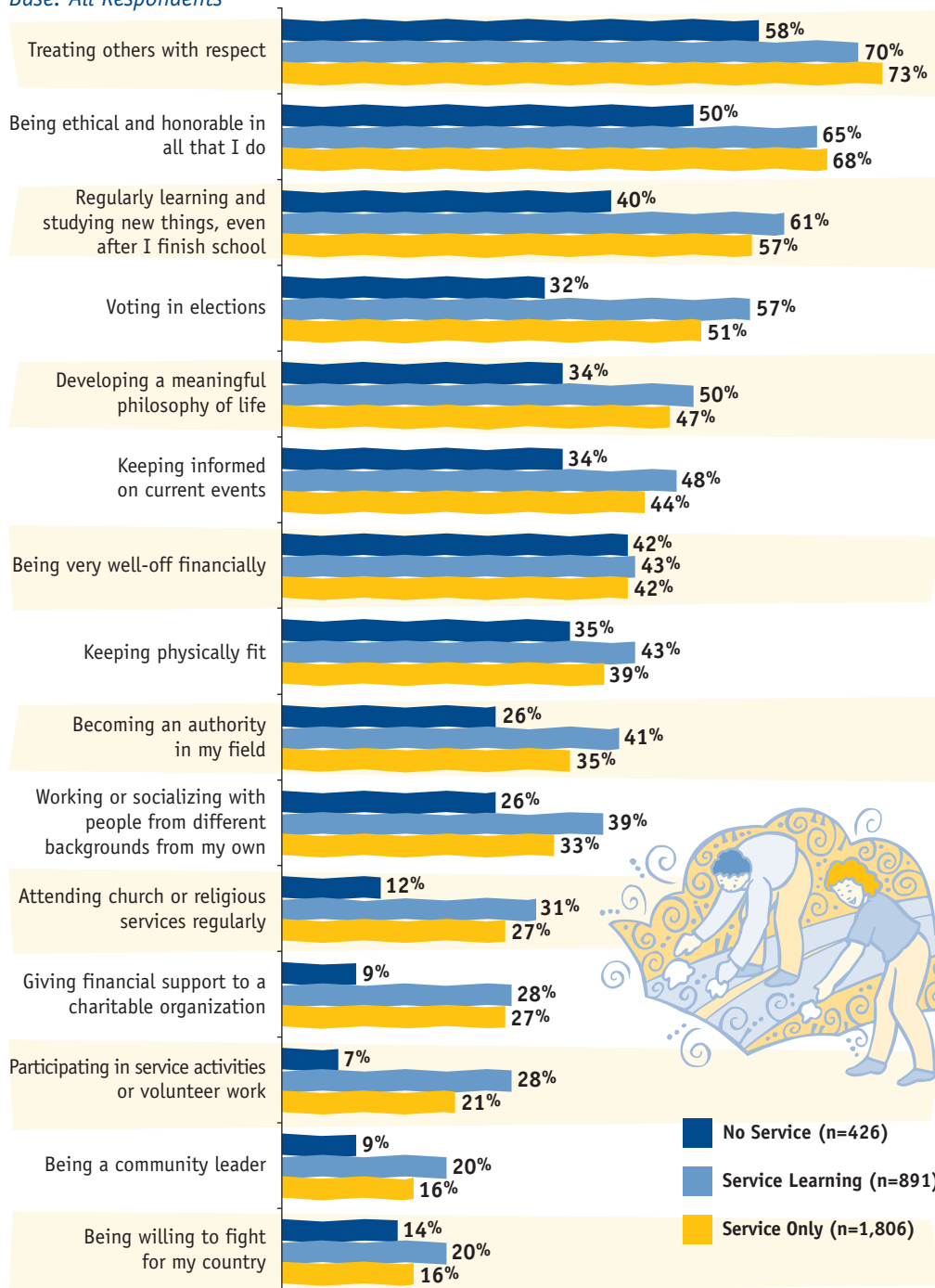
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How extremely/very important are the following to you personally?

Base: All Respondents



Source: "The National Survey on Service-Learning and Transitioning to Adulthood," National Youth Leadership Council, fielded online between December 2 and 15, 2005; n= 3,123 U.S. adults aged 18 to 28.

Young adults who participated in service, service-learning as well as service-only report higher levels of civic engagement, being more likely than their no-service youth counterparts to value voting, keeping informed on current events, participating in service in the future, and being a community leader.

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⁵ Billig, S., Root, S. and Jesse, D. (2005). "Working Paper. The impact of participation in service-learning on high school students; civic engagement." The center for information and research on civic learning and engagement.

⁶ Astin, A. W., Vogelgesang, L. J., Ikeda, E. K. and Yee, J. A. (2000). "How service-learning affects students." Higher Education Research Institute, January.

⁷ Kielsmeier, J.C., Scales, P.C., Roehlkepartain, E.C., & Neal, M. (2004). "Preliminary findings: Community service and service-learning in public schools." In *Growing to Greatness: The State of Service-Learning Project*, 6-11. St. Paul: National Youth Leadership Council.

⁸ Scales, P.C. and Roehlkepartain, E.C. (2005) "Can Service-Learning Help Reduce the Achievement Gap?" *Growing to Greatness: The State of Service-Learning Project*, 8. St. Paul: National Youth Leadership Council.

⁹ Eccles, J. S. and Barber, B. L. (1999). "Student council, volunteering, basketball or marketing band: What kind of extracurricular involvement matters?" *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 14(1), 10-43.

It's 8 a.m.—do you know what American kids are doing?

YouthPulseSM 2005 Released

You need to know almost as much about the youth market as you would if they were all your own children. How they spend their time, how they spend their money, their hopes, fears and aspirations and which parts of the kid experience are totally different today than they were a decade—or even a year—ago. **YouthPulseSM** is the only study covering these topics and hundreds of others for kids from age 8 to 21, and the 2005 study has recently been released. To learn more about YouthPulse, contact us at **877.919.4765**.

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Making the transition to adulthood is a very complex time, and expectations for the acquisition of new skills and roles are high. The very characteristics reported as making service experiences positive are those that provide youth with tools for this transition.

The benefits of service-learning to youth and communities are many. Young adults categorized as service-learning youth are now more politically and socially connected to their communities than their peers, both as leaders and as role models for young adults. They understand the importance of lifelong learning and, as a whole, are more educated and have higher aspirations than their peers who did not take part in service. Not only are they more active members of society, they are more satisfied with their current status in life. Many of the important skills learned by service-learning participants are those that ease the transition into adulthood. By providing youth with the service-learning option, communities are not the only ones to benefit: service-learning assists in the building of happier, more satisfied adults.

More information on this study is available in the chapter "The Impact of Service Learning on the Transition to Adulthood," in *Growing to Greatness 2006*, at http://www.nylc.org/rc_downloaddetail.cfm?emoid=14:632



Team Spotlight

Dana Markow

Vice President, Youth and Education Research



Dana Markow, Ph.D., Vice-President of Youth and Education Research at Harris Interactive, has considerable experience conducting a wide range of youth-related studies including children's media use, the impact of work on parenting and family life, and children's school experiences. Her research for foundations, corporations, and academia has been conducted among children, teens, and college students; and other key youth audiences such as educators and parents. Prior to joining Harris Interactive in 1997, Dr. Markow worked as a research consultant with the Children's Television Workshop and Nickelodeon, conducting formative research for the guidance of preschool educational television programs. She earned her Ph.D. in psychology from Harvard University and graduated magna cum laude from the University of Pennsylvania.

Ask a Question...

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Trends & Tudes Poll Vault

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