



RESEARCH PROJECT OUTLINE

Research and Graduate Education ♦ College of Agricultural Sciences
The Pennsylvania State University ♦ University Park, Pennsylvania

Title: Impact of Service-Learning on Youth and Communities

Probable Duration: 60 months (October 1, 2008 through September 30, 2013)

Personnel:

Project Investigator:
Nicole Webster (75%)
Department of Agricultural & Extension Education

Justification, Relevance, and Expected Outcomes or Impacts:

Service learning (SL) is an educational pedagogy that has been integrated into the framework of various organizations, clubs and schools throughout America. This learning and teaching style enables both the learner and the beneficiary to gain valuable knowledge and skills while engaging in a "service oriented activity". While many would argue how to exactly define the term service learning, there are key elements found in the foundation of a well planned SL activity (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Fredericks, 2001):

- Service-learning involves students in community service activities and applies the experience to personal and academic development.
- Service-learning occurs when there is "a balance between learning goals and service outcomes". Service-learning differs from internship experience or volunteer work in its "intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring".
- Service-learning course objectives are linked to real community needs that are designed in cooperation with community partners and service recipients.
- In service-learning, course materials inform student service and service informs academic dialogue and comprehension.
- Service-learning engages students in a three-part process: classroom preparation through explanation and analysis of theories and ideas; service activity that emerges from and informs classroom context; and structured reflection tying service experience back to specific learning goals.

Youths' participation in these activities contributes to a number of benefits such as:

- enhancing critical thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis by involving students in identifying and framing problems in settings that transcend disciplinary boundaries.
- involving students in assessing outcomes in a way that reveals the practical implications of chosen theories, research tools, analysis techniques, and presentation modes.
- preparing students for life-long learning by connecting formal education more fully with real-world experience.
- preparing students for citizenship by engaging them in dealing directly with community problems, challenging their assumptions and requiring them to integrate multiple points of view.

Despite the recent growth in SL programs, understanding of the processes of program implementation and impact on youth participants, families, and communities in distressed and marginalized communities is limited. The proposed research will help to identify key principles for effective SL program development, implementation, and impact with an emphasis on identifying "best practice" approaches for marginalized communities and populations throughout the state of Pennsylvania.

The intent is to provide empirical evidence regarding the efficacy of specific SL models and approaches for meeting a spectrum of youth and community development objectives. This includes the evaluation of SL programs aimed at enhancing the education and social development of children and youth, promoting school learning, strengthening families, and improving community life.

For the intervention studies and outreach education activities proposed in this AES project, there are a variety of anticipated outcomes. Outcomes for individuals include: improved attitudes toward self and others, increased involvement in community activities, increased interaction among youth and community, and increased participation in decision making processes, and increased service utilization. Outcomes for communities include: increased awareness and appreciation of youth voice and activity, increased local participation in community development decision-making processes, and the degree to which real community needs are met, such as increased safety, improved transportation, and the protection of natural resources such as lakes and streams.

Previous Work (Background) and Present Outlook:

The SL phenomenon has grown at a tremendous rate over the last 10 years. Nearly 12 million secondary students and over 900 public and private higher educational institutions are currently participating in SL activities (RMC, 2007). Many afterschool and youth organizations have also seen the benefit of SL opportunities for youth and young adults and have begun to incorporate and institutionalize this learning pedagogy into their organizational framework. Parents, caregivers and other caring adults have also recognized the benefit SL activities have on the overall success of a child. According to the 2001 Public Attitudes toward Education and Service-Learning survey, 94% of respondents noted that when youth do not have the necessary education or skills they need to succeed it poses a serious problem. One way to address this problem is to get them excited about learning, encourage good citizenship and leadership skills, and to incorporate SL activities in the school curriculum and afterschool modules to help students build the skills they need to be successful later in life. They felt SL was the perfect activity to foster engagement and the type of learning and development needed for youth in today's society (Root & Billig, in press).

Trends in Service Learning

SL activities have been more inclusive of minority participants and overall participation has increased (RMC, 2008).

- The number of high school students involved in service related programs has increased dramatically from 900,000 students to over 6,181,797 students in public and private schools in the past five years.
- The number of high school students involved in service-learning activities has increased even more dramatically rising from 81,000 students to 2,967,262 students.
- Approximately (20%) of Hispanic youth, 16% African American, and approximately 2% of other minority populations have reported involvement in service learning related activities in school and afterschool programs.

Benefits of SL

Although it has been difficult to fully capture the benefits of SL, attempts have been made by researchers from various disciplines to understand the impact of these experiences on the academic and social development of youth and adolescents (RMC 2007a; RMC, 2000b).

Service-Learning Provides Curriculum Enrichment

- Enriched learning environment
- Real applications of knowledge deepen understanding of intellectual concepts
- Provides opportunity to gain affective knowledge and interpersonal communication skills
- Improve student motivation, retention, and satisfaction with applied learning

Career Exploration: Professional Skill Development

- Opportunity to explore possible college majors and future careers
- Potential to gain professional skills and knowledge in agency settings
- Build valuable experience to enhance resume and employment opportunities

- Develop personal and career skills while being mentored by professionals

Personal Growth: Gain Critical Thinking, Interpersonal and Citizenship Skills

- Develop moral, ethical, civic, and social responsibility
- Gain empathy and multicultural understanding for others
- Develop critical reasoning and creative thinking skills by real problem-solving
- Foster a desire for lifelong service to fellow citizen and to global society

Improve Self-Esteem, Enhance Self-Worth and Increase Personal Joy

- Students feel worthy and important to others
- Self-reflection leads to enhanced self-awareness and appreciation of talents
- Helping others brings personal joy and increased satisfaction

In addition to benefits to the participant, the community experiences a number of positive outcomes (Kessler, 2000). For example, SL fosters future community leaders, explores various avenues for securing scarce resources, promotes moral and ethical citizenship among community members, links youth to community agencies and resources, builds community relationships, and improves relationships among the community and youth.

Despite these benefits, there are pockets of individuals across society who have not directly benefited from SL activities.

Marginalized Communities/Populations

Much of the discourse that revolves around service learning is void of the voices and experiences of minority populations and marginalized communities (Blanc, Brown, Nevarez-La Torre, & Brown, 2002; Hart & Atkins, 2004; Kirshner, Strobel & Fernández, 2003). Some would argue with this point because the majority of SL experiences take place in these types of communities, however, the residents are the community or population being studied rather than a full fledged participant in the program.

Minority populations bring a perspective unlike their white counterparts in service learning experiences (Campbell, 2004; Webster, 2007). Jones attributes this perspective to the “historical connections of communalism” and collectivism (Dunlap & Webster, in press). The understanding of community service for many communities of color and marginalized populations comes from a benevolent culture of connected individuals and not the missionary ideology typically introduced by outsiders of a community. By including these missing voices in the delivery and discourse of service learning, a greater appreciation and understanding can be gained of this entire field and be more representative of approaches and avenues to help these communities in particular (National Center for Schools and Communities, 2001).

One of the results of increasing participation and commitments to supporting service learning in a resource-poor environment may be the ability for others to realize the value of the community and its citizens in contributing to the development and growth of the area (Kraft & Miller, 2003; Lay, 2003). In addition, these experiences may assist individuals in developing skills necessary to improve their own growth and development and help stimulate knowledge, talent, and expertise which already exist in the community, key factors which have been overlooked in many intervention and development programs in urban and marginalized communities.

More research is needed to explore the accuracy of this speculation; however, early results suggest that service-learning may have an especially valued status as an achievement strategy for youth and families in marginalized communities both domestically and internationally (Lopez, 2000).

Findings from this AES project can be useful in determining how service learning projects can become an integral part of communities, non-formal programs, and educational institutions. Results from this study can be used to identify success and/or failures in service learning programs, techniques for implementation and strategies for

increasing the delivery of these programs. It will also lead to more rigor in the research field to address issues such as social connectedness, academic achievement, and pinning theoretical foundations to practice.

Objectives:

1. To identify SL program development and implementation processes and their relationship to program outcomes for participants, organizations, and communities in marginalized communities.
2. To assess the impact of SL programs on youth, young adults and communities in terms of their participation, attitudes, and knowledge especially as it relates to marginalized communities and communities of color, especially those in metropolitan areas.
3. To examine the experiences, relationships, roles and strategies of SL as a tool for engagement among and within communities of color and marginalized communities.
4. To examine the impact of SL experiences among international audiences which have similar social and cultural backgrounds as the US communities being examined in the study (e.g. African and Caribbean cultures).

Program development and implementation factors include: clarity of goals and objectives, strategies for selecting and training staff and for recruiting and orienting participants, level of involvement of participants and front-line staff in program planning, and characteristics of activity selection, e.g., the extent to which activities are developmentally and culturally appropriate.

Procedures:

To meet the four objectives noted above, a series of evaluation studies will be conducted of SL programs implemented in a variety of community settings. For each study, pre- and post-project interviews/ questionnaires will be conducted with administrators, staff, program participants, and family members. Observations and interviews will be conducted. In analyzing interview and observation results across programs, emphasis will be placed on identifying core strategies and techniques that SL practitioners across disciplines and sectors hold in common, regarding program planning processes, program operation, and “best practice” activities and activity facilitation strategies.

1. Research efforts and partnerships. Joint research collaborations will be identified through Penn State centers such as the Public Scholarship Associates, The Center for Human Development and Family Research in Diverse Contexts, and the Laboratory for Public Scholarship and Democracy, and the Children Youth and Family Consortium, and Cooperative Extension. SL practitioners and educators will be identified through the Pennsylvania Service Learning Alliance and the National Youth Leadership Council. From this cohort of individuals, a national study will be developed to measure the impact of SL experiences within communities of color and among marginalized youth populations. The proposed study involves conducting SL community based research projects in two geographically diverse communities in Pennsylvania and five nationally, with the goal of developing and testing intervention protocols for generating new lines of understanding and action as it relates to SL. Each of the community-based initiatives begins with a process of conducting surveys, interviews, and focus group sessions with youth, educators, and the professionals who work with them to determine the degree SL experiences impact their social development and sense of civic responsibility. Information derived from these surveys and focus groups will be used to frame the substantive focal points for the SL programs and provide guidance for determining project stakeholders and partners to include in the action research process.
2. Evaluation and outcomes evaluation: Process and outcome evaluation will be used to measure the impact of programs on youth, young adults and communities. Outcome evaluation will be used through the use of national data sets that have begun to measure civic participation and its relationship to community

relationships and family supports within minority populations. Additional evaluations will be conducted from the SL programs that have currently been developed through this AES project. Results from all of the studies noted above will be used to develop and refine outreach education resources and present and distribute them to extension educators and other professionals who are interested in working with youth populations.

3. Dissemination of information: To increase the level of participation in communities, a new strategy for working with entire communities will be developed, studied, and if found to be effective, disseminated. Based on study results, a package of dissemination resources will be developed to guide community and formal educators, and practitioners interested in adapting this researched, grounded, and comprehensive system to develop community cohesion from within an intergenerational framework.
4. Outcomes for the international sharing of information about effective SL strategies: To contribute to the knowledge base about SL practices that have been found to be effective in various Caribbean and African cultural and national contexts, community based research will be conducted in these countries each year. This is especially important to address the given influx of these populations in marginalized communities and communities of color. Youth, professional, and government participants will be interviewed to continue to find innovative ways to keep youth engaged and to determine best practices for engagement (Webster & Ganpat, 2008). Publications and presentations highlighting various countries' civic engagement efforts and outcomes and their relevance for addressing youth and community development will be highlighted each year.

Stakeholder Engagement:

Research and outreach education activities described in this AES project will incorporate youth and adult participants from various nonformal and formal educational programs (i.e. 4H, YMCA, afterschool programs). A broad base of scholars and practitioners will be sought in order to include the community voice. Extension educators, university faculty and outreach staff, community organization representatives, students, and volunteers from minority populations will be purposefully included in order to be inclusionary in both the delivery and evaluation of programs. Materials developed and distributed to support program development efforts will be culturally relevant in order to reflect properly targeted communities.

Scope of Impact:

Research tied to all objectives can be classified as integrated research and extension and international research and extension.

Integrated Activities:

Research results inform national educational agendas as well as the Extension agenda; new approaches for facilitating learning are developed, piloted, and, if found to be effective, disseminated to Extension educators and other professionals. Lessons learned from pilot projects inform the development of culturally appropriate instructional materials for delivery to various audiences (professional and lay audiences).

Milestones:

During the course of the programs and projects, monitoring methods will be incorporated to assist with feedback. Upon completion of programs, evaluations will be completed. These two measurements (surveys and focus groups) will be used to measure the accomplishments of a project/program. In addition to these measurements, there will be project planning meetings, presentation dates, and celebration events that mark the completion of certain programs.

Literature Cited:

Blanc, S., Brown, J., Nevarez-La Torre, & Brown, C. (2002). Case study: LSNA, Logan Square Neighborhood Association. In E. Gold, E. Simon & C. Brown (Eds.), *Strong neighborhoods, strong schools: The indicators project on education organizing* (pp. 56–77). Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform.

- Campbell, D. E. (2004). "What You Do Depends on Where You Are: Community Heterogeneity and Participation." Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association.
- Dunlap, M. & Webster, N. (In press). Enhancing Inter-Cultural Competence through Civic Engagement. Edited book chapter in *Civic Engagement in Higher Education/Creating Opportunities for College Students to Learn about and Practice Civic Engagement*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company.
- Eyler, J. & Giles, D. (1999). *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fredericks, L. (2002). *Learning that Lasts: How Service-Learning Can Become an Integral Part of Schools, States and Communities*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.
- Hart, Daniel, and Robert Atkins. (2002). Civic Competence in Urban Youth. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(4), 227–236.
- Kessler, R. (2000). *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Kraft, N. & Wheeler, J. (2003). Service-Learning and Resilience in Disaffected Youth: Research Study. In S. Billig & J. Eyler (Eds.). *Deconstructing Service-Learning: Research Exploring Context, Participation, and Impacts*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Kirshner, B. Strobel, K. & Fernández, M. (2003). "Critical Civic Engagement among Urban Youth." *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education*, 1(2), 1.
- Lay, C.J. (2003). "Civic Engagement in Poor Communities: Differences between Urban and Rural Poverty." Paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.
- Lopez, Mark Hugo. (2002). *Civic Engagement among Minority Youth*. College Park, Md.: CIRCLE.
- National Center for Schools and Communities, Fordham University. (2002). *Unlocking the schoolhouse door: The community struggle for a say in our children's education*. New York: Author. [Available at www.ncscatfordham.org/binarydata/files/unlockingschool.pdf (Acrobat file)]
- National Service Learning Clearinghouse. (2008). The Status of Service-Learning in the United States: Some Facts and Figures.
- RMC. (2007). *Impacts of Service-Learning on K-12 Participants*. Scotts Valley, CA: Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.
- RMC Research Corporation. (2008a). *Service-Learning and Student Engagement*. Scotts Valley, CA: National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.
- RMC Research Corporation. (2008b). *Standards and Indicators for Effective Service-Learning Practice*. Scotts Valley, CA: National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.
- Root, S., & Billig, S.H. (In press). Service-Learning as a Promising Approach to High School Civic Engagement. In J. Bixby and J. Pace (Eds.), *Educating Democratic Citizens in Troubled Times: Qualitative Studies of Current Efforts*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Webster, N. (2007). Enriching School Connection and Learning in African American Urban Youth: The Impact of a Service-learning Feasibility Project in Inner City Philadelphia. *Advances in Service Learning, Vol. 6* (pp. 159-176). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

Webster, N. & Ganpat, W. (2008). Promoting Agriculture and Food Sustainability through Apprenticeship Programs in the Caribbean: A Case Study in Trinidad and Tobago. Conference proceedings of the 24th Annual Conference of the Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education, Costa Rica (pp. 500-510).