

# Service-Learning Research: What Have We Learned from the Past

## Last year *Growing to Greatness™*

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produced interesting and important information about the field of service-learning. Reflecting on that information raised questions about what we have learned from previous research that might shed light on future *G2G* research ventures.

In preparation for this review of research, a small group of researchers and practitioners convened to discuss their thoughts on the most important/influential studies that shaped the history of service-learning research. Five research reviews and studies were selected as most influential.

### Research Reviews

- Conrad and Hedin (1989/1991)
- Billig (2000)

### Research Studies

- Conrad and Hedin (1981)
- Eyler and Giles (1999)
- Bailis/Melchior (Three national studies, 2002)

The purpose of this article is to summarize those studies and to discover directions for future research.

## Research Reviews

### *"School-Based Community Service: What We Know From Research and Theory"*

Dan Conrad and Diane Hedin, researchers from the University of Minnesota, reviewed what we knew about service and experiential learning programs in 1991. They suggested that "Service seems to be one of those ideas that many people view as good, but not of critical importance to education or to the wider society." They questioned whether interest by politicians and educators would be sustained, or whether youth service would remain on the fringes of the political and educational agenda.

They presented the rich history of experiential learning, from William Kilpatrick's urging the adoption of the "project method," a process-oriented teaching method through which students develop independence and responsibility, and practice social and democratic modes of behavior (1918); through the Citizen Education project of the 1950s, to the calls for more active, engaged educational programs in

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the 1970s; and the series of reports in the 1980s on educational improvement (Goodlad, 1984; Boyer, 1983; Harrington, 1987).

Using this historical backdrop, Conrad and Hedin gathered evidence to make the case for community service and experiential learning as a viable educational strategy. They acknowledge that "very

little, if anything, has been proved by educational research. One can always find research evidence to support a case.” They then explained the difficulties of doing research on service programs. Service, they say, “is not a single, easily definable activity like taking notes at a lecture.” They added that service “has a wide range of plausible outcomes,” thus making it difficult to determine the “appropriate dependent variables” (Conrad and Hedin, 1991:746).

Their review revealed several important findings. They discovered that “problem-solving ability increased more for students in community service (and other experience-based programs) than for comparison groups” (Conrad and Hedin, 1991:746). Improve-

ment occurred most when the “problems encountered were similar to those presented in the test, and when the program deliberately focused on problem-solving” (Conrad and Hedin, 1991:746). Besides intellectual gains, they also found social/psychological development. They reported that students in community service, and other experiential activities all made gains in social and personal responsibility. They also documented positive outcomes in areas such as more favorable attitudes toward adults and others, higher self-esteem, and a better sense of social competence.

Their report also cited mixed results from quantitative studies. Studies of the impact of community

service on increasing political efficacy and later civic involvement were divided. Some showed positive results, others showed no effect. On tests of general knowledge, service programs “only rarely” resulted in higher test scores (with the exception of youth engaged in tutoring).

### Qualitative Studies

While quantitative studies had been mixed, Conrad and Hedin found that qualitative data have demonstrated powerful impacts. Qualitative data enrich the knowledge base and provide “particular and peculiar impact” on each individual. In their own studies they demonstrated the “peculiar” impact of learning through increased responsibility, stronger youth voice, and “real world” environments.

They ended their review by suggesting that the “case for community service as a legitimate educational practice receives provisional support from quantitative, quasi-experimental, and personal reports and testimony from practitioners and participants” (Conrad and Hedin, 1991:749). While support for community service was mixed, it suggested that the serious consideration of practitioners and policy makers [about community service] was beyond question.

*Research on K-12 School-Based Service-Learning: The Evidence Builds*

Shelly Billig, of RMC Research, begins her review by suggesting that,



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## Service-Learning Research continued...

a decade later, the issues raised by Conrad and Hedin remain “current.” This provides a sense of historic continuity: Even though Billig reviews a much larger number of service-learning studies completed between 1990 and 1999, she believes the basic concerns remain unchanged. She focuses the review with a series of questions about service-learning. “Is it a program or a philosophy? What are the key elements? What do best practices look like? What are the effects and impact?” The purpose for her review was to show that 10 years of research addressed many of these issues.

Billig cites the tremendous growth of service-learning. In 1984, only 27 percent of high schools had community service and only 9 percent had service-learning (Newmann and Rutter, 1985). In 1999, 64 percent of all public schools and 83 percent of

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high schools had some form of community service (Skinner and Chapman, 1999). Thus, the incidence of service and service-learning tripled in 15 years.

Billig also writes that service-learning is supported by public opinion. While adults think the focus on civic education and positive youth development are good goals, they also express concern that service-learning will “detract from basics,” and are concerned about student safety and mandatory service (APCO, 1999).

Billig briefly traces the history of service-learning. She finds there is consensus that “Major components include active participation, thoughtfully organized experiences, focus on community needs, school-community coordination, academic curriculum integration, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and knowledge, extended learning opportunities, and development of a sense of caring for others” (Billig, 2000:662). Service-learning is viewed as a way to “reinvigorate the central role schools play in developing responsible, caring citizens who deeply understand democracy and the meaning of civic responsibility.” She mentions the Alliance for Service-Learning in Educational Reform (ASLER) Quality Standards as guidelines for effective practice.

Billig cites some of the limitations of the research studies. Most examples come from research conducted through program evaluations. Most programs vary immensely, and few use control groups. Very few track impacts over time. Many studies are not easily replicated, and the data are not easily validated. Despite these limitations, the body of evidence is “promising,” she finds. Much of the impact is supported by “similar results found in higher education.”

The remainder of the review cites a series of outcomes and impacts. For each area, Billig assembles an array of studies and specific results that support the general findings. Thirteen major areas are identified. Some of the areas of impact include positive effect on personal development, civic and social responsibility, academic skills and knowledge, and community members’ perceptions of schools and youths. She identifies several other “mediators” that influence impact, and affect program and learning quality:

- Intensity and duration of programs are related to project outcomes;
- Increased responsibility, autonomy, and student choice affect impact;

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- Direct, sustained contact with clients is responsible for more robust outcomes; and
- Different kinds of reflection and specific teacher qualities affect the outcomes of service-learning programs.

Billig ends by citing a need for more and better research. There is a need for more multi-site, experimental and quasi-experimental, longitudinal studies. More and better qualitative studies are needed to “provide deeper understanding and texture to our knowledge of how service-learning works.”

She concludes that, despite the growth in service-learning programs, few researchers have been drawn to the field. There is a need for more funding and better long-term studies. Citing the Conrad and Hedin review, she ends as they did a decade before:

“Only time will tell whether the current interest among politicians and

educators in strengthening the service ethic of our nations’ youth[s] will be sustained or whether new priorities or the same old pressures for higher basic skills will keep youth service on the fringes of the political and educational agenda.”

(Billig, 2000:663)

There is irony and history in these remarks. Two decades, two reviews, yet the conclusions remain the same. While the evidence in the last decade builds a stronger and more focused argument for service-learning, the need, the will, and the political and educational drive remain uncertain.

### Individual Studies

Several studies were listed as significant and important: the Conrad and Hedin study in 1979-80 (1981), the Melchior and Bailis studies from 1992-1999, and the Eyler and Giles study in higher education (1999). Each makes an enormous contribution to the field.

#### *National Study - 1979-80*

The Conrad and Hedin study (1981) of 27 school-sponsored experiential learning programs involving direct participation in community (community service, community study, career internships, and outdoor adventure) highlighted some of the early findings in the service-learning field. In comparing the outcomes of the programs, the authors reported that youths improved their grades as a result of experiential

learning programs. More importantly, they found the existence of a reflective seminar contributed most to the self-reported academic improvement of the students, along with evidence that programs that were intense (several hours per week) and had program lives of many months proved to have the most impact on intellectual development.

Besides the intensity and duration concerns raised, Conrad and Hedin also found there were favorable characteristics of good community learning sites. Having real responsibility, facing challenging tasks, selecting some of the activities at the site, having a caring adult to interact with, being allowed to choose activities, and having a variety of tasks to perform were all associated with better community-based learning environments.

#### *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?*

This book, which covers two studies conducted by Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles over a period of six years, proved to be the most frequently mentioned higher education study. The “Comparing Models” study, which gathered data from over 1500 students at 20 colleges and universities to attempt to answer some of the pressing questions about the value added to students by combining community service and academic study, was actually inspired by the Conrad and Hedin work. The authors suggested they wanted to do for higher education what Conrad

# Service-Learning Research continued...

## Service-learning affects critical thinking and problem-solving.

and Hedin did for Kindergarten–12th-grade education: assess the impact of experiential and service-learning programs on students. They examined possible changes in problem-solving and critical-thinking abilities, as well as changes in the complexity of student thinking.

The findings of these studies reveal much about the “learning” in service-learning. It is the learning, they suggest, that is one of the primary goals of educational institutions. Their major findings include: learning begins with personal connection, and learning is useful, developmental, and transforming. They also suggest citizenship rests on learning.

Seventeen program outcomes were defined, including: Service-learning added value to academic learning and provided better understanding; program quality affected student learning; service-learning anchored understanding in rich experiential contexts, and integrated service-learning affected critical thinking.

Thus, Eyer and Giles concluded

service-learning affects critical thinking and problem-solving. Program quality that predicted critical thinking applications are tied to classroom integration. Finally, they found that doing important work, doing work over time, having diverse environments, and having good partnerships all affected the quality of outcomes.

### *A Summary of Three National Studies*

The studies by Alan Melchior and Larry Bailis of Brandeis University summarized in this report include the 1992-95 study of Serve America (with Abt and Associates), the 1994-97 study of Learn and Serve America programs, and the 1995-98 study of the Active Citizenship Today (ACT) initiative (Melchior and Bailis, 2002). The focus of these studies, dealing with civic measures, was on personal and social responsibility for the welfare of others, community involvement, leadership, acceptance of diversity, communication skills, and volunteer commitment.

This series of studies produced important results. While the outcomes of each study varied, they did demonstrate impact on students’ attitudes, communication skills, involvement in volunteer service and total hours of service. Other areas affected included leadership ability, awareness of community issues, acceptance of others, and personal

commitment. Some outcomes involved improved social studies grades, and reductions in arrests, teen pregnancy, and class failures. The ACT studies specifically showed impact on improved teamwork.

Discoveries indicated that impact on attitudes and behaviors was directly related to service experiences, and service experiences most closely tied to course curriculum produced the best results. These results confirmed previous research that service experiences and programs can be designed to shape different skills and outcomes.

They also found that program quality and intensity affect outcomes. Program design and implementation “play a major role in the degree to which theory plays out in practice” (Melchior and Bailis, 2002:212). Clearly differing hours of service affected impact: High school students showed more

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impacts and also engaged in 40 percent more service hours. The ACT study showed that time-on-task was related to program impact.

These studies also shared information about quality characteristics of service experiences (similar to Conrad and Hedin). Students reported many site traits that led to good learning: challenging tasks, responsibility for important decisions, interested adults, freedom to explore interests, variety of tasks, and real responsibilities. There was consensus on these characteristics of quality site experiences over two decades worth of work.

Examination of long-term impacts produced important findings. Performing a follow-up study one year later indicated that one-time involvement in service-learning was not likely to produce long-term impacts. “Short term programs yield short term results. Without continued involvement, almost all program impacts disappeared” (Melchior and Bailis, 2002:216).

## Conclusions

The issues and findings from the first major study (Conrad and Hedin, 1981) are restated and reaffirmed through the many research efforts of the past 25 years. That service-learning has impact is beyond doubt. How often and how significant that impact depends mainly on issues of quality: of people; of intensity and duration of the program; of program design; of the service experiences; of preparation, processing, and evaluation of the experiences; and of the integration into the curriculum. All of the studies collectively identify the important indicators of quality that need to be addressed.

Based on this analysis, the G2G effort should be as much focused on questions of quality as it is upon measuring the existence of service-learning programs in schools. Case studies can help explain the relationship of quality elements to outcomes. Also needed are longitudinal studies on the long-term impacts of service-learning.

Service-learning research has come a long way in 25 years. Clearly there is sufficient evidence to proclaim it is “worthy of serious consideration” by educators and community members. The Growing to Greatness study should contribute more valuable information on these important issues of the past because they are still clearly issues for the future. **G2G**

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