

A Framework for Further Research: The Community Impacts of Service-Learning

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We are often told that service-learning combines community service and academic achievement, and that it produces positive impacts upon participating young people, the institutions where they are taught, and the community as a whole.² The centrality of community to service-learning is codified in places like Massachusetts where the program is described as "community service-learning."

The annual *Growing to Greatness* reports and much of the formal service-learning research literature have documented numerous benefits for the young people who provide the service.³ But there has been surprisingly little systematic attention to the other half of the equation — addressing what community really means in this context, and few rigorous efforts to define and measure the difference service-learning makes for the people served.⁴ For example, should community refer to something that is defined from within (by people who feel they share a common space or identity) or by outsiders? Should the definition be limited to geographically defined

spaces or should it also include groups of people who see themselves as sharing important common attributes other than where they live or work? This article will begin to fill this gap by laying out the issues involved, and by using the research literature and the experiences of a high-profile service-learning/community engagement project being carried out by the YMCA of the USA.

Overview

Federally mandated reporting and evaluation of Learn and Serve America programs provide many insights into the difference that service-learning activities have made in the community. These reports document the activities that service-learning projects undertake and hence the *intended* outcomes. For example, the Learn and Serve America information system divides all service-learning projects into eight types of activities: health and nutrition, education, environmental, homeland security, public safety, housing, human needs, and community and economic development, and shows that in the 2005 program year,

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most of the projects run by a total of 1,628 grantees fit into three categories — education (40 percent), environment (25 percent), and health/nutrition (24 percent) (Learn and Serve 2005).

Program evaluations of Learn and Service America provide additional insights into the *quantity* of service and its value in the eyes of host agency staff. For example, the 1999 National Evaluation of Learn and Service America conducted by Alan Melchior and his colleagues at Brandeis University incorporated surveys of 150 local agencies at 17 sites and revealed that more than

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1,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade were involved in more than 300 projects each semester, providing approximately 154,000 hours of service. The host agencies were uniformly pleased with the results, with 96 percent or more saying that they would use service-learning students again, that they would pay at least minimum wage to have this kind of work done, and rating the experience as “good” or “excellent.” Two-thirds of these agencies also reported that service-learning students enabled them to increase the agency capacity to take on new projects, and 90 percent said that service-learning had helped them to improve their services to clients in the community (Melchior et al. 1999).

In addition, the agency respondents in the evaluation surveys indicated a strong belief that the services were having direct benefits for agency clients. For example, 75 percent of the agencies that provided tutoring and other education-related services felt that the service-learning students had helped raise the skill levels, engagement, and self-esteem of the students being assisted (Melchior et al. 1999).

Finally, some studies have used a “supply price” approach to developing estimates of the value of the time put in by service-learning par-

ticipants by asking host agency representatives for their judgments about what it would cost to hire someone to do the job, then estimating the total value of these services. The Abt-Brandeis evaluation of Learn and Serve America (Melchior et al. 1999) estimated a total per participant cost of \$149, which in turn produced services and other market benefits worth a total of \$586 per participant, nearly four times as much.⁵

These kinds of information are useful in many ways, but do not provide a uniform framework for conceptualizing community impact and do not yield direct estimates of the difference that service-learning is making in communities. The interviews and focus groups that we conducted with representatives of five YMCAs participating in the YMCA of the USA’s IMPACTPLUS civic education and service-learning initiative provide many useful ideas about the next steps that can be taken.⁶

Insights from the IMPACTPLUS Projects

Interviews and telephone focus groups conducted with IMPACTPLUS leaders from the YMCA of Southern Nevada, YMCA of Greater Burlington (Vt.), YMCA of Somerset Hills (N. J.), Camp Wood YMCA (Kans.), and the Mankato

(Minn.) YMCA as part of ongoing YMCA of the USA research and evaluation activities are beginning to provide data about community impacts that should be helpful in shaping future ways to conceptualize and document them. These ideas include:

- Well-designed and well-implemented service-learning programs can have impacts upon the institutions in which they are planned, the “host agencies” in which service-learning participants provide service, and in the community at large, as well as upon individual service-learning participants and recipients of service.
- The community impacts of service-learning projects are often very broad and hard to fit into pat categories such as the eight CNCS

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policy areas listed earlier because they often encompass many categories at the same time. YMCA efforts to “improve the lives of citizens” and “mak[e] changes in the community” illustrate this point. This is especially true of service-learning efforts that aim at “youth development” because the knowledge and skills young recipients of service-learning gain can lead to a wide variety of positive outcomes, many of which are impossible to predict precisely.

- The IMPACTPLUS community impacts have resulted from a process-oriented approach of research and relationship-building more than a goals-oriented approach. In other words, the YMCA leaders chose to focus on the process of planning and implementing quality service-learning and civic education (such as beginning with resource mapping) rather than on setting out to achieve specific, defined goals (such as promoting literacy or improved health of members of the community).
- The broadness and unpredictability of the community impacts make it difficult to develop methodologies to measure them. Leaders of several YMCAs caution that many important outcomes cannot be easily captured in surveys, and they therefore advocate more open-ended approaches such as focus groups and efforts to obtain “testimony” from people who have



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experienced the most dramatic changes. This issue is highlighted by the fact that the work of these YMCAs resulted in a number of *unintended* positive outcomes for individuals, groups, and communities, all of which support the positive outcomes they were intentionally seeking. For example, a youth participant in one of the projects eventually involved his whole family in planning and running Saturday night activities for youths.

- Community impacts are often “cascading,” with immediate (primary) impacts on service recipients resulting in further

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Photo courtesy of GNCS.

(secondary) impacts down the road over varying periods of time. For example, the efforts of a YMCA to train young people to serve on nonprofit boards can be expected to result in improvements in agency functioning over time, which in turn will result in further benefits for the clients of the agencies. Similarly, the efforts of another YMCA to make youths aware of healthy options within the community should, if effective, lead young people to make healthy choices, which would result in many longer-term benefits for them and their families. The cyclical nature of this process

can perhaps be best illustrated by one YMCA's random acts of kindness by young people, which can be expected to change community perceptions of young people, which should result in changes in the ways adults interact with youths, which in turn should result in more positive outcomes for the young people.

- The scope of direct community impacts of service-learning varies widely, sometimes limited to the clients of a given host agency, sometimes addressing a given segment of the community such as high-school-aged youths (or subsegments such as high-school-aged youths with disabilities), and sometimes encompassing the community as a whole.
- Community impacts often interact with service-learning participant benefits, and it is sometimes hard to draw a firm line between them since many successful examples illustrate a two-way process. In several IMPACTPLUS projects, the members of the community have recognized the need to provide a positive environment for teens; at the same time, teens have educated the community about what makes a positive environment for teens, what they want to be engaged in, and the power teens have to make a difference. Even though the intended result

was to change youths, in actuality the community itself has also been changed.

- There is a widespread belief among YMCA leaders that community impact is maximized when the planning for service-learning incorporates explicit efforts to understand community assets and needs through processes such as resource-mapping. The results are better designed and better targeted service-learning programs, yielding more extensive community impacts.

These ideas, in turn, yield many ideas about the best ways to conceptualize community impact, along with a preliminary approach to assessing community impact. Both the literature and the leaders of the YMCA IMPACTPLUS projects make it clear that:

- Multiple methodologies must be employed when assessing community impact, efforts that encompass both closed-ended approaches such as surveys and open-ended methodologies such as interviews, case studies, and focus groups.
- The methodologies should ideally incorporate a two-tiered (or more) approach that involves both the service-learning providers and the host agencies working together to clarify what

Figure 1
Preliminary Analytic Framework for Impacts of Service-Learning Programs on Participants, Clients, Sponsoring Agencies, and Communities

	Impacts within the agency that sponsors the service-learning opportunity:	Impacts on the way the sponsoring agency relates to recipients of its services:	Impacts on the way the sponsoring agency relates to other agencies and to the community at large:
Institutional-level impacts of service-learning programs: policy, structure, attitudes, and relationships	Changes in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum or programming • Agency structure or functioning • Role of youth in the agency • Relationship of agency with other service providers • Relationship of the agency with “the community” • Educator or staff attitudes 	Changes in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency programming and methods of service delivery • Agency structure or functioning • Relationship of the agency to other service providers serving the same clients • Relationship of the agency with “the community” • Educator or staff attitudes 	Changes in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of and linkages among agencies with similar clients or missions • Cross-sector knowledge and linkages (e.g., nonprofits and the business community) • Leaders and staff of other community groups and organizations
	Impacts within service-learning participants:	Impacts on the recipients of direct service:	Impacts on the community and indirect recipients of service:
Individual-level impacts of service-learning programs	Changes in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth academic achievement • Youth social development • Youth civic development 	Changes in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receipt of services • Acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will result in immediate and longer-term increased well-being 	Changes in <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate and longer-term well-being of those who interact with service recipients (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors) • The beliefs of the community at large (e.g., changes in the image of young people)

each expects to happen and how to best measure it.

Figure 1 illustrates the preliminary analytic framework for understanding the concept of community

impact that flows from the literature and YMCA colleagues.

Agenda for Further Research

Because the term “community impact” is so rich, the best way to

assess community impact is to identify and measure the entire range of meanings. As the second and third columns of the preliminary framework show, a comprehensive analysis of community impact would (and should) include many interrelated and complementary aspects of community. Existing research can shed light on some of these aspects, but much more can be done in terms of both conceptualizing and documenting these benefits.

The ideas in this article are intended to serve as a launch pad to help service-learning policy makers, practitioners, and researchers take a harder look at community impact. The next steps in the process should include efforts to refine and build upon the above-described framework to clarify what the term “community impact” really means and how each element of impact can be best measured. More specifically, this suggests that future research on this topic could most beneficially proceed along three tracks:

- continued discussions among service-learning providers, representatives of the community who directly benefit from the services (primarily host agencies), and academics to refine the framework that has been outlined in this article and its implications for research and evaluation
- efforts to flesh out and then pilot the community impact methodologies discussed in this article,

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e.g., combining testimonials and two-tier research

- systematic studies of community impact of service-learning in general, and the variations in impact provided by kindergarten-through-12th-grade schools, higher education, and community-based providers, studies that could either stand on their own or be integrated into efforts to provide a comprehensive understanding of service-learning and its impacts

If well conceptualized and carried out, this work should help practi-

tioners, policy-makers, and community members understand service-learning and the difference it makes. **G2G**

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2. For example, Senator John Glenn (2003) referred to service-learning as “academics in action” combining “classroom lessons with community projects.”
3. See, for example, Shelley Billig and RMC Research (2005), which provides summaries of dozens of studies touching on academic impacts, civic/citizenship impacts, environmentally responsible behaviors, and social/personal impacts and “Celebrating the Good News” (Billig 2005).
4. Major exceptions to this rule include two articles in the *Michigan Journal of Service Learning*: Nadine Cruz and Dwight Giles (2000) and Adeny Schmidt and Matthew Robby (2002).
5. The RAND evaluation report (1999) revealed a different picture, with the programs producing roughly 60 cents in benefits for each dollar of program expenditures over a three-year period, but noted that there was a pattern of increasing return over time, and it concluded that “there is reason to believe that there will be long-term positive returns to communities.” Yet another approach involves using constant estimates of the value of an hour of volunteer time developed by the Independent Sector and updated every few years.
6. Additional information about IMPACTPLUS, a civic education project coordinated by the YMCA of the USA and funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Time Warner Foundation, can be found at www.impactplus.org.

7. For example there are ripple effects in which some of the benefits of students who are tutored rub off on fellow students and begin to affect the overall school climate. Similarly, efforts to clean up a neighborhood park affect

those who visit the park, the houses facing the park, and perhaps even the way the neighborhood is seen, leading to increases in property value.

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