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# THIRD GENERATION OF SERVICE-LEARNING RESEARCH YIELDS MORE THOROUGH DATA

by Dale A. Blyth, Ph.D. and Peter C. Scales, Ph.D.

The first and second generations of studies on service-learning, encompassing an era from the 1960s to the early 1990s, can be said to have consisted largely of:

1. research on experiential learning and community service in general (but not service-learning as we define it today); and
2. research conducted specifically on service-learning programs, but having numerous methodological shortcomings.

Today, a third generation of service-learning research is characterized by a higher quality of research design. We describe four of these studies in this article. As Figure 1 shows, these four studies represent several conceptual types of studies whose combined findings are likely to give us the most comprehensive understanding to date of what the effects of service-learning programs are and why those effects seem to occur.

One study offers a national profile of K-12 programs receiving funding from the Corporation for National Service. This comprehensive study includes a broad range of program models and degrees of quality, and thus provides a national look at the state of service-learning. Two other studies look more closely at particular models of service-learning. One examines the specific participation and community problem-solving strategy in use within several middle and high school sites. By focusing on reflection, program duration, and clarity of program goals, the second model takes an in-depth look at the overall effects of programs—though varied in type of service students contribute—within six middle school sites. The fourth study is looking at programs with a specific emphasis on academic impact. This study is investigating three middle school programs, carefully selected for their adherence to high quality standards, and for their belief that service-learning programs ought to contribute not only to students' citizenship and social responsibility, but to their academic success.

All these studies have sample sizes of about 1,000 or more students, all are using control or comparison groups, and all are collecting data to help explain why service-learning might have the effects that are observed.

## NATIONAL LEARN AND SERVE AMERICA STUDY

The Center for Human Resources at Brandeis University and Abt Associates, Inc. are conducting this study of 18 middle and high school-based service-learning programs receiving funding from the Corporation for National Service. About 1,300 students, half participating in service-learning and half control students, are involved in the study. The researchers are administering surveys that measure a range of variables, including personal and social responsibility, leadership skills, engagement with school and perceived behavioral competence, acceptance of diversity and student involvement in volunteer activity. Additionally, school records of students' grades, attendance and discipline are being included. A one-year follow-up of these students into the 1997-1998 school year is planned.

Institutional impacts are being measured through interviews with program coordinators, teachers, administrators, students and representatives of sites where students provide service.

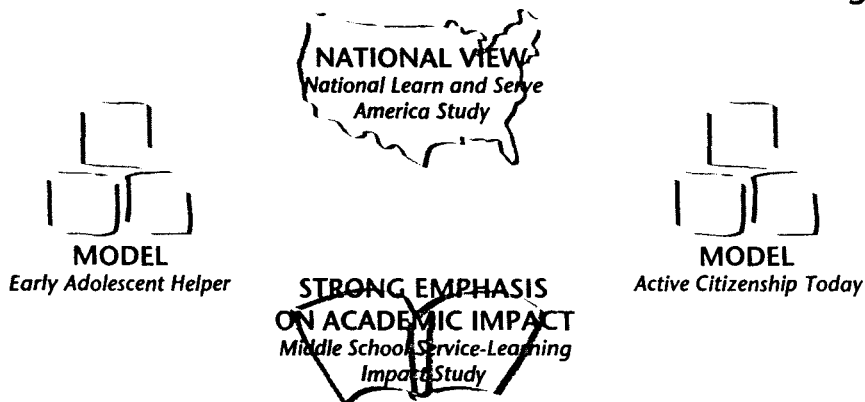
A unique aspect of the study is inclusion of interviews with beneficiaries of the programs in which students serve. These interviews as well as interviews with students and others involved in the programs will aid in describing the programs' broader community impact.

## ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP TODAY STUDY

The Center for Human Resources also is conducting a 2½ year study of the Active Citizenship Today (ACT) program. ACT is a national program operated by the Close Up Foundation and Constitutional Rights Foundation, with principal funding from the DeWitt Wallace-Readers' Digest Fund. The program combines civic education with hands-on community involvement projects. The intent is to promote students' civic participation and encourage schools' inclusion of such activities as integral components in core social studies classes. The school districts participating in the evaluation are in Jefferson County, CO; Jackson, MS; and Omaha, NE.

In several middle and high schools in each district, students will complete pre- and post-service surveys similar to the one used in the Learn and Serve America national study. About 450 service-learning and 450 control students per district will be involved, for a total of about 2,700 students. Students in eight service-learning and control classes also will complete a problem-solving exercise developed specifically for the ACT program. Students' ability to gather information, identify problems, propose potential solutions, and outline action plans will be assessed through this exercise that takes a full class period to administer. In addition, grades, attendance and discipline records of all students participating in the study will be obtained, and selective student

### Four Current Studies of the Effects of Service-Learning



interviews and focus groups will be conducted.

Finally, site visits, teacher surveys and interviews with teachers are important aspects of the data collection. Results will allow better understanding of how ACT programs are being implemented in the different sites and how extensively these programs have been integrated into social studies classes.

## THE HELPER MODEL OF SERVICE-LEARNING IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE STUDY

The Helper Model study is being conducted by researchers at the City University of New York's Center for Advanced Study in Education. The research is examining how one particular approach, developed by the National Helpers Network, may affect students. Helper Model programs are at least 10 weeks in duration, include reflection, and have clear cognitive and affective learning goals and service outcomes. Additionally, these programs have a clearly identified leader who is involved with the students for the duration of the program.

Six schools in the New York City area are involving 1,200 service-learning students and 400 control students. All students are completing pre- and post-service surveys, and achievement, attendance and discipline data are being monitored on the entire sample. A subset of students will participate in interviews, observations and essay writing. At least 10 students per school will participate in the interviews, and observations will occur during visits to the sites where students provide service, as well as during class reflection.

The goals of the study are to: 1) examine the impact of participating in the Helper Model of service-learning for young adolescents, particularly in terms of their achievement and opportunities to learn, interpersonal problem-solving skills, career orientation and responsibility, self-efficacy and caring; and 2) determine how this impact is related to the context of service-learning. The Helper Model study includes a number of different settings in

which service activities occur, and the researchers hypothesize the ways that students experience service are likely to vary across sites; hence, effects ought to vary as well. Significant documentation about the sites and program characteristics, as well as about what actually occurs during student reflection, will be maintained so that the researchers can place findings in a more richly detailed context than is typically found in previous research. The final report of this three-year study is expected in 1999.

## THE MIDDLE SCHOOL SERVICE-LEARNING IMPACT STUDY (MISLIS)

Search Institute is working in partnership with the National Youth Leadership Council to study how high-quality middle school service-learning programs might affect academic success as well as citizenship and personal development. The MISLIS study, funded by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, is assessing students and teachers in three middle schools across the country in the 1996-1997 school year, and a subset of those students and teachers in the following year. The sample consists of about 1,200 6th-8th grade students, about equally divided between service-learning and comparison students. The schools are Greenfield Middle School, Greenfield, MA; Kammerer Middle School, Louisville, KY; and Nipher Middle School, Kirkwood, MO.

These schools were selected after an extensive national search resulted in 70 schools being recommended for consideration. First, schools were screened to determine if their programs met standards for high quality as defined by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform. Then, more than a dozen schools meeting these criteria participated in a telephone interview to further assess the reliability of those screening responses. Four schools were selected to participate in site visits

where teachers, students and administrators provided additional information about the quality and operation of the program. On the basis of these steps, the three schools were selected.

The selected schools have service-learning programs that are well integrated into the curriculum, with plentiful preparation and reflection activities being a seamless part of

coursework in language arts, sciences, math, social studies or health. Kammerer and Greenfield have year-long programs and Nipher a half-year program. Different kinds of service activities are offered at each school, including environmental projects, befriending the elderly, and a community history project.

The features that make this study potentially significant include its focus on academic success (few previous studies have looked at service-learning's impact on academic success) and its mix of traditional measures of academic success (such as grades) and more "authentic" ones (such as critical thinking skills shown in student journals). Search Institute researchers are using a combination of surveys, problem-solving measures, student journals, grade point-averages, attendance and discipline, and teacher interviews to gather comprehensive data.

The main hypothesis of the study is that high-quality service-learning programs can have a positive impact on academic success. The study also should offer insights into how this impact occurs. The researchers hypothesize that service-learning may positively affect the school's ability to promote various developmental assets among youth, the quality of instruction and, to a lesser extent, parent involvement. In turn, improvement in these relationships and opportunities may positively affect students' beliefs in their ability as well as their caring about and engagement with schoolwork, among other variables. The result should be increased academic success, as defined by grades, problem-solving skills and level of critical thinking. The study's final report is scheduled for the spring of 1998. ▲

*"In the end, the goal of service in the schools is to teach values – to help a student understand that to be fully human one must serve."*

Ernest Boyer  
High School  
1983

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Alan Melchior. *National Learn and Serve America Study*. Center for Human Resources, Brandeis University, 60 Turner Street, Waltham, MA 02164. (617) 736-3775.

*Active Citizenship Today Study*. Ibid.

*Early Adolescent Helper Model Study*. Deborah Hecht, Ph.D. Center for Advanced Study in Education, City University of New York Graduate Center, 33 W. 42nd Street, New York, NY 10036. (212) 642-2986.

*Middle School Service-Learning Impact Study*. Peter C. Scales, Ph.D. Search Institute, 700 S. Third Street, Suite 210, Minneapolis, MN 55415. (612) 376-8955. And 940 Chestnut Ridge Road, Manchester, MO 63021, (314) 225-2212.