

*Executive Summary*

# **How Service Learning Affects Students**

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## *Purpose*

The two major goals of this study were: 1) to explore the comparative effects of service learning and traditional service courses on the cognitive and affective development of college undergraduates and 2) to enhance our understanding of how learning is enhanced by service. These questions were explored by means of a quantitative longitudinal study of a national sample of students at diverse colleges and universities and a qualitative study of students and faculty who participated in service learning at a subset of these institutions.

## *Method*

Longitudinal data were collected from 22,236 college undergraduates attending a national sample of baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities. These students were followed up during the fall of 1998; most of them had volunteered to participate

## *Principal Findings*

- Service participation shows significant positive effects on all 11 outcome measures: academic performance (GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-

- Better than four service-learning students in five felt that their service “made a difference” and that they were learning from their service experience.
- The single most important factor associated with a positive service-learning experience appears to be the student’s degree of interest in the subject matter. Subject-matter interest is an especially important determinant of the extent to which (a) the service experience enhances understanding of the “academic” course material, and (b) the service is viewed as a learning experience. These findings provide strong support for the notion that service learning should be included in the student’s major field.
- The second most significant factor in a positive service-learning experience is whether the professor encourages class discussion.
- The frequency with which professors connect the service experience to the course subject matter is an especially important determinant of whether the academic material enhances the service experience, and whether the service experience facilitates understanding of the academic material.
- The extent to which the service experience is enhanced by the academic course material depends in part upon the amount of training that the student receives prior to service participation.
- Qualitative findings suggest that service learning is effective in part because it facilitates four types of outcomes: an increased sense of personal efficacy, an increased awareness of the world, an increased awareness of one’s personal values, and increased engagement in the classroom experience.
- The qualitative findings suggest that both faculty and students develop a heightened sense of civic responsibility and personal effectiveness through participation in service-learning courses.
- Both qualitative and quantitative results underscore, once again, the power of reflection as a means of connecting the service experience to the academic course material. The primary forms of reflection used were discussions among

students, discussions with professors, and written reflection in the form of journals and papers.

- Both the qualitative and quantitative findings provide strong support for the notion that service-learning courses should be specifically designed to assist students in making connections between the service experience and the academic material.

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## *Related HERI Publications*

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