

Sculpting the Undergraduate Experience Through Service Learning: An Emerging Picture of how Students Benefit

Recent polls of the American public document a desire for young people to be versed in civic responsibility as well as in academics. These sentiments are echoed by calls for **instruction that provides opportunities for practice by students in universities throughout the nation** (Kezar, 2000). In the postsecondary setting, **community service learning (CSL)** has enjoyed a long and prosperous history, dating back to John Dewey's early works on experience as a meaningful educational method (Roufs, 2000). During the 1930s and 1960s, university students flocked to join public works programs and community-oriented projects like VISTA. Today, **community service learning has enjoyed a dramatic resurgence on university campuses across the United States and includes outreach into communities, non-profit organizations, schools, and service abroad.** Through outcomes-based research, we know that these projects have had immeasurable benefits on clients of service learning. Although we intuit that transformational experiences for undergraduate students can be attributed to involvement in service learning, our understanding of its impacts is in a formative stage.

A growing academic literature points to some of the more significant impacts of participation in service learning for undergraduate students. Beyond offering opportunities for undergraduates to engage in civic participation, **CSL**

enhances the learning process, cognitive and affective development, moral development, identity processing, understanding complex material, and pro-social reasoning skills (Warren et al., 1995; Jacoby, 1996; Forman and Wilkinson, 1997; Eiler and Giles, 1999; Astin, et. al., 2000).

Recent research undertaken by ArtsBridge in the form of interviews, focus groups, thematic coding of text, and observations with undergraduate scholars tends to reinforce these postulates. As one ArtsBridge Scholar offers, "It's nice to be able to come full circle, from your freshman year to your senior year, and to be able to give back to others."



ArtsBridge Scholars frequently characterize their experiences with the program as **expanding their horizons by compelling them to address the challenges associated with combining cognitive, creative, and physical aspects of the arts in working with K-12 pupils.** Overall, Scholars reported that they were able to **broaden their university experience by applying what they had learned in the classroom to diverse real-world contexts.** With support from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) the Center for Arts Research in Education (CARE) will continue to explore the experiences of scholars to elaborate further upon these impacts and highlight best practices for enhancing the undergraduate experience through opportunities for meaningful service to others. Through this research, we will be able to gain unique insight into the perspectives of undergraduate students as they embrace new responsibilities in sharing their talents and abilities with others.