Benefits of Community-Based Service-Learning

Thousands of community-based organizations engage millions of young people in service and service-learning. Though research in K-12 and higher education shows a wide range of benefits of effective service-learning, much less is known about the benefits of service-learning in community-based settings. This fact sheet highlights emerging knowledge.

What Are Community-Based Organizations?

Community-based organizations include:

- social service and other nonprofit providers or associations that may engage young people (and adults) as volunteers;
- community-based youth development organizations and after-school programs that include service or service-learning as part of their programming;
- and faith-based organizations that provide services and offer service experiences as part of their programming.

Benefits for Youth Participants

Youth who participate in high-quality community-based service-learning are likely to benefit in a number of ways:

- Increased access to the range of supports and opportunities they need to grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.
- Increased sense of self-efficacy, as young people learn that they can impact real social challenges, problems, and needs.
- Higher academic achievement and interest in furthering their education.
- Enhanced problem-solving skills, ability to work in teams, and planning abilities.
- Enhanced civic engagement attitudes, skills and behaviors.

Benefits for Youth Development Organizations

Youth development organizations and after-school programs that use service-learning can benefit from this strategy in a number of ways:

- Young people are more likely to stay engaged when they feel their participation is meaningful and they can make useful contributions.
- Service-learning gives an intentional strategy for addressing goals for learning and personal development through civic engagement and community service.
- Service-learning can cultivate connections between the organization, schools, higher education, and other community groups.
- Service-learning can increase program staff and volunteers' level of engagement, leadership capacity, and satisfaction with their work.
- Service-learning reinforces effective youth development practices, providing young people with, among other things, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, opportunities for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

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Benefits to Organizations that Utilize Young People as Volunteers
Community-based organizations that engage young people in service and service-learning point to the following kinds of benefits:

- The opportunity to expand their mission and reach without substantially increasing costs by engaging a cadre of competent, motivated young people.
- New energy, ideas, and enthusiasm as well as specialized skills that young people can bring to the organization.
- Increased public support and visibility in the community as young people become ambassadors for the agency in their schools, homes, and other networks.
- New partnerships and resources.
- A new generation of volunteers for their own organization or cause.

Benefits for Service Recipients, Communities, and Society
Beyond the young people the organizations directly involved, community-based service-learning benefits the people served, their communities, and, ultimately, society:

- It meets real needs and priorities for individuals and communities, as young people bring new energy, capacity, and creative ideas.
- Community residents have opportunities to build positive relationships with young people.
- Communities see youth in a different way—as resources, not problems.
- A new generation of caring and experienced citizens, activists, and volunteers is cultivated.

Benefits Don't Come Automatically
The benefits outlined above are not automatic or universal. The specific benefits or impact will vary, depending on the focus, scope, and quality of a particular service or service-learning experience. Integrating core elements of effective service-learning is key to reaping these and other benefits. Among these core elements are:

- young people have active and meaningful leadership roles;
- the program is guided by clear and intentional learning and development goals;
- active, intentional, and structured reflection is integral to the program;
- young people are involved across time (at least 20 hours across several months);
- and the service projects meet real community needs and priorities.

Conclusion
Community-based service-learning does not receive the kind of public attention that service-learning receives in education. Yet it offers significant benefits to society, to young people, and to the participating institutions. Lawrence Neil Ballis and colleagues write: "Schools are not the only institutions that educate our young people, and community-based organizations can be far more than the 'stage' that schools use to deliver the service-learning programs that they develop. Kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade schooling is only one format for 'education' where young people gain the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and aspirations they will need to become successful adults."

For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/cb_facts/benefits_cbosl/expanded.php

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