

## IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION IN SERVICE-LEARNING ON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

BY EMILY KIRBY

**A** CIRCLE Working Paper by Shelley Billig, Sue Root, and Dan Jesse of RMC Research Corporation examines the impact of service-learning on civic engagement. The study finds that service-learning students score higher than comparison students on several outcomes, although most of the differences are not statistically significant. Service-learning students are significantly more likely to say they intend to vote and that they enjoy school.

According to Dr. Billig, "The intention of the study was to estimate the effects of service-learning compared to more traditional ways of teaching similar subject areas." The study measures civic knowledge and behaviors, as well as other factors that generally predict academic success.

The study suggests that service-learning is effective when it is implemented well, but it is no more effective than conventional social studies classes when the conditions are not optimal. Good implementation means that the program lasts at least a semester, offers direct contact with service recipients, and cognitively challenges students.

### SERVICE-LEARNING WORKS, BUT ONLY WHEN WELL IMPLEMENTED

The study compares more than 1,000 high school students who participated in service-learning programs with those who studied social studies, civics, or government in schools matched for similar demographics and student outcomes. More than half of the students in the sample are Latino.

Along with the length of the program, teacher characteristics also influence outcomes. Teaching experience is significantly related to students' tendencies to value school, enjoy math and science, and their ability to gain civic skills dispositions. Longer service-learning experiences are associated with higher civic knowledge, civic dispositions, and efficacy scores.

Finally, the success of the service-learning program depends strongly on the type of service project. Students who engage in direct service (e.g., tutoring or visiting seniors) are most attached to their communities, but they score lower in other areas such as enjoyment of specific subject matters and levels of academic engagement. Students who engage in indirect service (e.g., fundraising or research) show the highest levels of academic engagement. Students who engage in political or civic action (e.g., circulating a petition or organizing a community forum) scored highest on civic knowledge and civic dispositions.

### LIKE STUDENTS IN TRADITIONAL CIVICS COURSES, STUDENTS IN SERVICE-LEARNING CLASSES GAIN FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE

Although the students in the comparison group studied civics, social studies, or American government, they did not obtain significantly more factual knowledge of these subjects than

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*CIRCLE hosts a discussion on "Alternatives to Large, Traditional High Schools: Can They Enhance Students' Preparation for Work, College, and Democracy?" See pages 10-12 for more information.*



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the students in the service-learning programs did. It appears that schools need not sacrifice factual knowledge if they choose to employ service-learning. On the contrary, students learn as much factual information about civics and politics through direct experience as through more formal instruction.

### **SERVICE-LEARNING PEDAGOGY CONFERS SMALL, ADDITIONAL BENEFIT OVER OTHER ACTIVE PEDAGOGIES**

Based on this study, it does not appear that the alternatives to service-learning are passive, lecture-style classes. Instead, teachers who do not use service-learning tend to employ mixed forms of instruction that include student projects, presentations, debates, and field trips. Service-learning teachers are not significantly more likely to use "active" instructional techniques than are other teachers in the study. The study finds that active teaching techniques are beneficial, and service-learning confers a small additional benefit over other active teaching methods.

Finally, the research examined what the literature has identified as a set of best practices, or "Essential Elements" of service-learning. The study found that some of these elements enabled positive student outcomes, but some did not. A table showing which elements are effective can be found in the full report.

The complete study, "CIRCLE Working Paper 33: The Impact of Participation in Service-Learning on High School Students' Civic Engagement," can be downloaded from: <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP33Billig.pdf> ■

#### ***The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools Seeks Civic Learning Practice Examples***

The Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools is a long-term effort to renew and elevate civic learning in our nation's schools. As part of this effort, the Campaign actively seeks civic learning practice examples for our online inventory—an educational resource for educators, policymakers, and advocates to discover civic learning practices by grade level and teaching approach. Teachers, school administrators, program officers, community members, and others engaged in educating K-12 students for democracy are encouraged to submit lessons, extracurricular opportunities, curricula, supplemental programs, and other resources. **Visit [www.civicmissionofschoools.org](http://www.civicmissionofschoools.org) to find and submit new practice examples.** Questions? Email [submissions@civicmissionofschoools.org](mailto:submissions@civicmissionofschoools.org) or call Adam at 212.367.4570.

**CIRCLE** (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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