

The Influence of Community Service Learning on Student Engagement, Retention, and Success: A Review of the Literature

The following literature review was prepared by Kim Davis, Instructor III, SLALS, with the assistance of Isla Jordan, Systems Librarian, on behalf of the Carleton Initiative for Community-University Engagement Pedagogy Group in order to explain the benefits of service learning to Carleton University faculty and administrators new to the concept, with a particular emphasis on how community service learning influences student engagement, retention and success.

Community Service Learning Defined

Community service learning (CSL) is a unique form of experiential learning – different from volunteerism, co-op placements, internships, etc. The underlying difference between CSL opportunities and other experiential approaches to learning is that CSL opportunities benefit both the student and the recipient of the service while ensuring that the outcomes are equally shared by both parties involved; a service is provided while at the same time learning is occurring (Furco, 1996). Furthermore, CSL programs, unlike volunteer programs, must have some type of academic context and to be effective, “members of both educational institutions and community organizations work together toward outcomes that are mutually beneficial” (CACSL, 2010). The community organizations tend to be the under-sourced non-profit/NGO sector, but not exclusively so, with some CSL taking place in partnership with public institutions and the private sector. The key to CSL is that the learning experiences are well-connected with the course material in a way that the engagement with the course material aids in more successful and effective comprehension of the content matter being taught (O’Hara, 2001).

Background on Community Service Learning

CSL has been developing for more than fifteen years in the US; however, in Canada, the adoption of CSL is a fairly recent development. “Although there have been examples of small initiatives in Canada over the past decade, only in the last few years has this pedagogical approach gained more widespread recognition and support on Canadian campuses” (Denby, 2008). CSL pedagogy in Canada is increasing steadily with the support of The Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning (CACSL) which was created in 2004 with the mandate to support, educate and network with students, educators, and communities to ensure the effective growth of CSL in Canada (CACSL, 2010).

Benefits of Community Service Learning on Post-Secondary Studies

There is a growing body of literature in the field of CSL in post-secondary pedagogy which documents the benefits of CSL during undergraduate studies (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Singleton, 2007; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Studies indicate that “students evaluating their service-learning courses are more likely than students evaluating other courses to report that the courses promoted interpersonal, community and academic engagement, were academically challenging, and encouraged their continued study at the University.” (Gallini & Moely, 2003). Furthermore, there appears to be a correlation between CSL and increased personal awareness, increased social awareness, and improved student learning outcomes that are all rooted in learning conditions that ultimately engage and retain students in post-secondary institutions (Prentice & Robinson, 2010).

Increased Personal Awareness

There is extensive evidence in the literature that illustrates “service-learning has a positive effect on students’ personal and interpersonal development, including a sense of personal identity, spiritual growth, moral development, the ability to work well with others, and leadership and communication skills” (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). Students are empowered when they realize how their knowledge in a subject area can benefit the community at large and that they themselves can benefit society – something that they often neglect to realize prior to their experiences within the community (O’Hara, 2001). Furthermore, it is illustrated in numerous studies that students benefit personally with regards to an increased sense of efficacy (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Eyler, Giles, & Schmeide, 1996). Although there are students who find these experiences to be frustrating and/or boring, the majority of the students feel that through these experiences, they achieve personal satisfaction for the tangible work they are doing and they feel a sense of accomplishment for what they have contributed (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

Increased Social Awareness

With regards to social outcomes, in particular to increasing students’ social awareness and understandings, a survey of the literature finds that CSL increases students’ awareness of their community and its needs, helps change stereotypical beliefs, reduces ethnocentrism, and increases understanding of social and cultural diversity (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Matthews, 1999; Borden, 2007; Denby, 2008; Duffy et al., 2008). In an extensive study conducted by Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee (2000), qualitative findings suggest that students develop an increased awareness of the world and of their personal values when engaged in CSL opportunities that allow them to interact with and apply their knowledge to real world problems. Furthermore, Eyler, Giles, & Schmeide (1996) provide student testimonials clearly illustrating that CSL helps students connect with each other, with faculty members, and with their communities as they take greater interest in social and community issues and develop commitment to active citizenship.

Increased Student Learning Outcomes

Academically speaking, many educators who have evaluated CSL within post-secondary institutions have concluded from their research that CSL helps students retain more information learned in class, achieve higher course grades, and have greater satisfaction with the course (Astin & Sax, 1998; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000; Gray et al., 1998; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Strage, 2001). One study in particular reports on how CSL experiences lead to improved problem-solving, critical-thinking, and rhetorical skills (Matthews, 1999). In O’Hara’s (2001) study of CSL in an Applied Communication course, students reported that they gained a much richer understanding of the organizational communication concepts that they were studying in class and that they had greater confidence in their communication skills than they possessed prior to their CSL experiences. The development of these skills is further believed to lead to career development, as students have a better understanding of the “real world” and they are better able to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned in their university courses to their future careers (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). It should also be noted however, that after a three year study that surveyed over 1300 students at 28 institutions, Gray et al. (2000) more cautiously concluded that student participation in service-learning courses had only modest effects on students’ civic participation and life skills, but no effects on their academic and career development.

The findings of Gallini and Moely’s (2003) extensive study illustrate that CSL students evaluated their course experience more positively than did non-service learners and they scored significantly higher on

all five scales: community engagement, academic engagement, interpersonal engagement, academic challenge, and retention than non-service learners. It was also reported that students in 3rd and 4th year courses with CSL components consistently spent more hours studying than non-service learners. Another research study examining the effects of CSL on exam scores and emotional empathy of students in a life-span development course, found that students who partook in the service-learning project options instead of an interview project and a research paper scored significantly higher to those who completed the non-CSL choices on all but their first exam and they demonstrated a significant increase in emotional empathy as measured by the Emotional Empathetic Tendency Scale (Lundy, 2007).

Most notably, in Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee's (2000) substudy of 433 students from 19 American post-secondary institutions, four students out of five (79.9%) reported that the connections between their service and their course materials enabled them to provide a better quality service, and 82.8% reported that the service experience enhanced their understanding of the academic course material. These results show clearly that both the service and the academic components of CSL courses are greatly enhanced by each other. However, a valid point is raised in MacDonald's (2009) study, which conducted a series of interviews with CSL partners in the Edmonton region, by those on the community side who stated that sometimes the costs of the CSL experience for the organization and for the students outweigh the benefits if the experiences are not long enough to allow for proper implementation and reflection. Conway, Amel, & Gerwien (2009) who conducted a meta-analysis of 103 different samples of CSL studies occurring between 1968-2006 also reported the importance of enhancing CSL through structured reflections in classes. When students are given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, the impact on their learning outcomes is even greater.

Benefits of Community Service-Learning on Student Engagement and Retention

There is an overwhelming consensus among educators using CSL in their classrooms that the aforementioned benefits lead to increased student engagement, improved academic outcomes and ultimately, to increased rates of retention (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; O'Hara, 2001; Duffy et al., 2008; Prentice & Robinson, 2010). In a recent study conducted in the field of Engineering from a representative sample of 369 students across 4 years and 5 departments, 64% reported that CSL had a positive impact (25% reported that the impact was very strong) on the likelihood that they would continue in Engineering, while only 3.5% reported a negative impact, with the rest neutral. Females and underrepresented groups by race indicated that CSL had a significantly (5%) more positive impact on retention. The report also concluded that underrepresented groups in Engineering appear more motivated and concerned about helping others as a result of partaking in service-learning projects (Duffy et al., 2008). These findings correlate with a study conducted by Matusovich, Follman & Oakes (2006) that examines the Engineering Projects in Community Service (EPICS) program at Purdue University and suggests that women in the fields of Science and Engineering are attracted to and are more engaged in learning situations in which there are personal interactions, hands-on learning with real applications and authentic contexts.

It is ultimately the simple realization that they can "make a difference" that often ignites a sense of social engagement within students that continues throughout their lives. Few educational goals are more important than having students appreciate the extent to which the topics they study are relevant to their lives and to the lives of others (O'Hara, 2001). A review of the literature illustrates numerous accounts from faculty members stating that when they incorporated service-learning components into their classes, the students were more motivated and responsible for their learning, more engaged in the readings and more participative in class lectures; students who had failed or dropped their courses in the past excelled in this type of learning environment, and many students who may not have otherwise

done so, went on to pursue master's degrees in similar fields (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Prentice & Robinson, 2010).

Based on their research, Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee (2000) reported that "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." This therefore illustrates the worthiness of adopting service-learning pedagogy into university teaching as it has much greater potential to be beneficial to a student's development than volunteerism or non-academically lead types of service which have no connection to academic content.

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