



# Benefits of Community-Based Service-Learning

Source: Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Search Institute, December 2007

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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.

## **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.”

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*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](http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/cb_facts/benefits_cbosl/expanded.php)*

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