

## Chapter 13

# Practicing What We Teach, Practitioner Reflections: Understanding the Impact of Service– Learning on Those Who Teach It

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### ABSTRACT

*While the impact of service-learning on students and to some extent on communities is well documented, little research addresses the direct impact on instructors. To fulfill the historic civic mission of education and contribute to civic health, a holistic understanding of impacts on all stakeholders will be necessary. This chapter presents the findings of interviews conducted with diverse service-learning practitioner types (higher education faculty members, K-12 teachers, and nonprofit instructors), institutions and years of experience. The findings demonstrate three categories of benefits that accrue to practitioners: pedagogical, personal and relational. Additionally, indirect impacts also contribute to practitioners' satisfaction. Many of these impacts map nicely onto the existing literature that describes the motivations that lead practitioners to undertake service-learning. The link then between motivations and actual benefits received leads to several salient recommendations that can support instructors and administrators wishing to advance engaged work at their institutions.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the United States, education, engaged citizenship, and social justice are highly valued. Being able to discern the factors that degrade or improve those elements of a strong democracy are of prime importance, and speak directly to the quality of the nation's civic health. Civic health, however, has shown steep declines in the United States over the past 30 years (National Conference on Citizenship in Association with CIRCLE Saguaro Seminar, 2006). Citizens have increasingly filled the role of spectator versus participant in matters of the nation, but a healthy democracy requires its citizens to be invested

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and participatory. Formalized education as well as informal learning opportunities have a role to play in further developing the civic capacity of citizens.

Benson, Harkavy, and Hartley (2005) argue that the core mission of American higher education is a democratic mission. As Checkoway (2001) notes, there is a foundation of preparing students to apply their knowledge to the betterment of communities and for active democratic participation in the historical civic mission of many American research universities, however, “it is hard to find top administrators with consistent commitment to this mission, few faculty members consider it central to their role, and community groups that approach the university for assistance often find it difficult to get what they need” (p. 125). The present moment of renewed attention to the civic mission of universities beginning in the early 2000’s is a “fourth wave” of higher education civic engagement initiatives (Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service, n.d.). This wave is a forward-looking vision at the future of higher-education itself and moves beyond efforts to bring civic engagement to individual classrooms, instead focusing on a fully-engaged university as a whole. The publication, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012), calls on higher education to “embrace civic learning and democratic engagement as an undisputed educational priority” (p. 2). In order to create the ‘civic-minded campus’ the report suggests, faculty will be an integral component.

Paralleling the call for higher education institutions to return to their historic civic roots, is a focus on compulsory, K-12 education. In *Teaching America: The Case for Civic Education* (Feith, Ed., 2011), the authors delve into US history and remind the reader that “the founders [of the United States] supported the idea of a robust civic education” (Day O’Connor, p. 4) that would strengthen our new republic. Many recent scholars have also called for a renewed focus on the historic role of public education and the pressing need to revise curricula to ensure that students have the skills to become active citizens engaging in the important processes inherent in a democracy (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001; Fuhrman & Lazerson, 2005; McDonnell, Timpane & Benjamin, 2000; Levine, 2007). A 2012 report from the U.S. Department of Education, *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action*, emphasizes the importance of “educational experiences that intentionally prepare students for informed, engaged participation in civic and democratic life” (p. 1). Others have also suggested that the role informal education and the community play in shaping future generations’ civic engagement is paramount (Longo, 2007; Gimpel & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2009; Levine, 2007).

Critical, high-quality service-learning through both formalized education and informal learning experiences has the potential to re-engage U.S. citizens in a way that would raise awareness and improve committed participation in civic matters, thereby improving civic health. Indeed, one of the “six proven practices” identified as effective for civic learning with K-12 audiences is service-learning (Gould, 2011) and one of the three “powerful pedagogies” that promotes civic learning in higher education was also identified as service-learning (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). In a review of the research Ryan (2012) summarizes the long-term outcomes of high-quality service-learning. These outcomes include students who are:

1. More likely to vote and be involved in community activities (the very essence of civic health),
2. Better prepared for careers and exhibit strong professional skills,
3. More trusting of teachers and other students, which contributes to a healthier school environment, and
4. Seen in a more positive light by community partners.

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