A core duty of institutions of higher education is to produce concerned and active citizens who will advocate for necessary societal change. Educators have responded to the demand for higher education to address public issues and concerns (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001) by integrating service-learning into their courses as a forum for students to apply the knowledge they learn in practical and meaningful ways. Jacoby (1996) defines service-learning as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning” (p. 5). Service-learning can be integrated into courses to provide a learning experience outside of the traditional classroom that forces students to think about societal systems and structures in a way that simply reading a textbook cannot.

Service-learning is an innovative teaching pedagogy that engages students in hands-on experiential learning and can serve as one method to facilitate the goal of developing social justice advocates. Lee Anne Bell (2000) provides a definition of social justice that emphasizes the dynamic nature of the concept:

We believe that social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. We envision a society in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live. (p. 21)

Through well-structured service-learning, students can develop...
a social justice lens and learn to analyze issues they encounter at their placements and in their lives with a critical eye toward underlying injustices at the core. In promoting this critical worldview, we are preparing the next generation of social change agents who will be concerned with how those injustices can be addressed in order to strive toward equitable participation in society.

Theories of Student Learning

Service-learning is rooted in traditional theories of student learning. Kezar and Rhoads (2001) trace its core concepts back to John Dewey. They describe Dewey’s belief that early philosophy created a false dualism between body and mind and between the spiritual and material world and perpetuated a culture of dichotomous values throughout higher education. Dewey, on the other hand, saw learning as an inextricable process of knowing and doing (Peterson, 2009). He disagreed with Aristotle and Plato’s division of practical and intellectual knowledge and their belief that people should be educated according to their place in society. Instead, Dewey called for democratic education to break down these dualisms, serving to perpetuate power and privilege in society, and embrace a “philosophy of continuity...based on a belief that people, as holistic beings, learn best by engaging mind, body, spirit, experience, and knowledge” (p. 162). Dewey proposed an educational model that calls for precisely the kind of experiential, boundary-free learning that service-learning provides. Current theorists agree that a seamless view of learning, in which cognitive and affective outcomes are no longer considered separate, is most beneficial for students (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996).

Building upon Dewey’s seminal work, David Kolb advanced a theory of experiential education that informs many current educational practices and beliefs. According to Kolb (1984), learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p.41, as cited in Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2000). He sees learning as a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Applied to service-learning, students first engage in the concrete experience of providing service, then observe and reflect upon that experience. Those observations and reflections are then synthesized into abstract concepts—tied to academic content in the case of service-learning—which can be called upon later in active experimentation, when those concepts are applied to new experiences. Kolb’s model provides the rationale for service-
learning’s intentional reflection process and describes how a student’s service experience is translated into knowledge that can be applied to future situations.

Cognitive development is a basic yet central goal of higher education that service-learning can facilitate. Perry (1970) provides a model of cognitive development whereby thinking progresses from dualistic to uncertainty in the face of multiple viewpoints and a resolve in relativism. Students at Perry’s highest level of cognitive development are able to take multiple viewpoints into consideration and come to a conclusion and act on them, despite their acknowledgement that there is not one, single solution. This advanced cognitive reasoning is essential for critically thinking about social issues and ways to address them (Eyler & Giles, 1999), a core component of civic engagement and social justice work.

**Impact on Student Learning**

In order to be sure that service-learning is yielding intended effects, research has focused on learning outcomes of student participants. Because some aspects of student learning experiences are unique to service-learning, one might expect that student outcomes would be different from those of a traditional classroom. Looking at various facets of learning, including developmental and social skills, academic achievement, and civic engagement, it is clear that service-learning can impact students’ commitment to social justice in ways that traditional learning environments may not.

One of the most comprehensive studies to date of service-learning’s effects on students was conducted by Eyler and Giles (1999) for their book, *Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?* Using surveys and interviews, they collected data from over 1,500 students across the country, 1,100 of which were service-learning participants while comparing multiple variables at the beginning and end of one semester. The following sections use Eyler and Giles’s research as a framework to examine the effects of service-learning on student outcomes as they relate to developing a consciousness of social justice and a commitment to positive change.

**Personal and Social Development**

Early research on the effects of service-learning focused primarily on students’ personal and interpersonal development. Service-learning puts students in roles and situations that they would not be exposed to in a traditional classroom, giving them the opportunity for increased personal development, interpersonal competence, and exposure to diversity.
Although these qualities may not be explicitly stated goals of the academic curriculum, they are essential to a holistic view of student learning as well as to success in future professional settings (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Eyler and Giles (1999) looked at various aspects of students’ personal development, including self-knowledge, spiritual reward, reward from helping others, career benefits, and perceived personal efficacy. Many students indicated that increased self-knowledge was one of the most important outcomes of their service-learning experience, citing areas such as increased self-confidence and knowledge of personal interests as those in which they learned more about themselves. Other research has found similar results, with numbers as high as 97 percent of students indicating increased self-knowledge and self-efficacy as a benefit of their service-learning experience (Simons & Cleary, 2006). Students are challenged to put their skills and classroom learning into practice and in doing so can develop a sense of confidence in their abilities. This sense of self-efficacy is related to future involvement in community service, with participants of service-learning showing greater levels of perceived ability to make a difference in the community than non-participants (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008).

Other research has found that some students actually show a decrease in their sense of power as a result of service-learning experiences. Miller (1997) compared students’ perceived ability to make a difference in the world before and after a service-learning course and found that students’ perceived capacity to change actually decreased. He notes that the effect varied significantly depending on characteristics of students and placement sites, underscoring the importance of not generalizing this finding to service-learning as a whole. Miller argues, however, that perhaps the decrease in scores is not actually a bad outcome, as students traditionally rate their ability to make a difference much higher than older adults, suggesting a shift from idealism to realism as a result of the service experience. Future research would benefit from separating out characteristics of students and placement sites to look at the differential effects those qualities have on student outcomes.

Over half of the students Eyler and Giles surveyed indicated that the reward of helping others was one of the most important benefits of service-learning. Students translated good feelings they received from helping others into a sense of personal competence. Some of those students discussed a sense of spirituality or fulfillment of a religious commitment in relation to the help they provided.
Students reap personal benefits from service-learning but they also benefit in terms of social development. Studies have found increases in students’ abilities to work with others as a result of the service-learning experience (Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998; Simons & Clearly, 2006). Social skills are developed as students interact with people and experience situations they might not traditionally encounter in their undergraduate education. They also show increases in compassion and sensitivity (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008), two qualities that are important for positive interpersonal interactions. Another aspect of interpersonal competency is leadership skills, which can include anything from role modeling good work ethic for new volunteers to launching an innovative program at a service site. Service-learning students display an increase in their capacity to lead (Eyler & Giles, 1999), although some research suggests that this outcome is no more a result of service-learning than traditional community service (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Whether the effect comes from the service, the learning, or a combination of both, students can be put into leadership positions at their service-learning sites, from facilitating meetings, to delivering a presentation, or organizing projects, that force them to learn to work with diverse populations and enable them to develop valuable leadership skills.

Tolerance and acceptance of diversity are among the major outcomes associated with service-learning (Simons & Clearly, 2006; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Eyler and Giles (1999) purport that all other personal and interpersonal gains from service-learning stem from the increased appreciation of other cultures and reduction in stereotypes that service-learning fosters. Students are given the opportunity to interact with other volunteers, staff, and clients at community-based organizations who often represent more diverse populations than their peers in classes and on campus. These informal personal interactions can start to break down stereotypes and increase tolerance for diversity, setting the groundwork for more positive intergroup attitudes and appreciation of other cultures (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Not only do these students value diversity, but they show an increase in their commitment to promote racial understanding (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Similar research on community service involvement shows that effects such as valuing interracial relationships remain long after the service experience ends (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999).

However, additional research found conflicting evidence, with service-learning showing no effect on students’ diversity attitudes (Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer & Ilustre, 2002). Moely et al. (2002) hypothesize
that this insignificant effect could be a matter of poor instrument reliability, but that it could also be a programmatic flaw. Perhaps a lack of intentional integration in reflection on topics such as race and social class, which are difficult for students to translate into knowledge on their own, inhibit the positive effects of diverse interactions. Indeed, a study by Myers-Lipton (1996) compared a group of students in a service-learning class with a group of students who volunteered on their own, finding that reductions in students’ ratings on the Modern Racism Scale were significantly larger for service-learning participants than volunteers. This difference between the attitudes of service-learners and volunteers can be accounted for by the integration of reflection that occurs in service-learning.

Practitioners must be weary of service-learning structured in such a way that perpetuates the power dynamic between what is often predominantly white college students working in communities of color (Moely et al., 2006). Rather than challenging students to examine the societal structures that perpetuate injustice in society, poorly structured service-learning experiences can have the opposite effect of reinforcing stereotypes (Gallini & Moely, 2003). However, when done properly with thorough and intentional reflection, service-learning can lay the groundwork for tolerance and understanding that students can build upon and apply to interpersonal relationships throughout their lives.

**Academic Engagement and Achievement**

For the acceptance of service-learning as a pedagogy in academia necessarily focused on academic outcomes, results showing the academic benefits of service-learning are necessary. Early research focused primarily on developmental and social gains of service-learning in which connections to social justice are fairly clear but research on academic development, can also show the positive effects of service-learning on creating conscious citizens. Research has shown that service-learning students feel more engaged, evidenced by more positive course evaluations than nonservice-learning students (Gallini & Moely, 2003; Miller, 1994). Students rate their service-learning courses as more academically challenging (Gallini & Moely, 2003) and more valuable than their nonservice-learning peers (Miller, 1994). They also report learning more and being motivated in service-learning courses than in their nonservice-learning classes (Simons & Clearly, 2006). Finding their experience in the community engaging, students are naturally inclined to work harder.

Although it is clear that students feel as though they learn more from service-learning, actual data on academic achievement has shown mixed
results. Some studies have found differences in grades between students who participate in service-learning and students who do not, while other studies find no difference between the two groups (Miller, 1994). While grades may provide a convenient standard upon which to measure academic learning, the conflicting evidence in the literature suggests that it may not be the most effective method to analyze service-learning outcomes. In fact, Eyler and Giles (1999) suggest that there is no reason that service-learning should increase the actual acquisition of knowledge over effective classroom teaching. Where they do see service-learning providing academic enhancement is moving beyond factual regurgitation to deeper understanding of course content and application of knowledge. This advanced understanding and application is precisely what allows and encourages service-learning students to explore the social justice implications of their learning.

In a study of four sections of a pharmacy communications course, two of which integrated service-learning and two of which did not, coders rated research papers written by students in the service-learning sections as significantly higher on measures of complexity of thinking and inclusion of practical examples (Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998). Students’ writing showed that they were thinking more deeply about the concepts they learned in class and were able to back up their arguments with specific real-life examples. Similarly, Feldman et al. (2006) found that service-learners’ “strong sense of involvement with the issues they investigated helped those students construct cogent, well-supported arguments for clearly articulated positions of ‘their’ issues” (p. 24). Having the opportunity to collaboratively engage in the issues with their community partners, service-learning students were able to construct more substantive, applied, and contextually-based arguments. Students are able to transfer specific knowledge to unrelated situations using their improved reasoning skills, more apt to apply material to life issues they may have become passionate about through exposure at their placement.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) note that the reflection component which links community service with course goals is essential in providing both the challenge and support central to progression through Perry’s scheme of cognitive reasoning. In reflection, students are encouraged to draw connections and come up with solutions to social problems based on various viewpoints, which helps them advance and practice complex cognitive reasoning (Eyler & Giles, 1999). A study by Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson (2005) shows that given encouragement – in their case, written
feedback on reflective journals challenging students to delve deeper into relevant issues – students are able to thoroughly explore issues, positively impacting their critical thinking capabilities. Students internalized these prompts, displaying more advanced critical thinking in even the raw versions of their writings as the semester progressed that suggests long-term benefits from practice. Although journals and essays are important and effective ways to facilitate reflection, in-class discussions are particularly effective for achieving learning goals (Mabry 1999, as cited in Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004). By exchanging views and sharing perceptions and experiences, participants are exposed to multiple perspectives, challenging their beliefs more than can be done through independent writing alone. Exposing students to information and beliefs contrary to their own is an essential step in fostering the development of a social justice lens.

Students working in a community setting learn first-hand that problems and solutions are not always as clearly understood as a neatly arranged textbook may present them. Moreover, they begin to appreciate the various layers and constituencies involved in trying to solve community problems, noting things like difficulties in organizing a group, involving those with multiple points of view, and identifying and joining already existing efforts (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Whereas a common solution that nonservice-learners gave Eyler and Giles (1999) to a proposed community problem was to ‘just tell them’ how to solve their problems, service-learners understood the complexity of issues and societal structures that prohibit such an easy solution from working. Instead, service-learners offered realistically complex solutions that addressed multiple ambiguities inherent in social issues as well as the unavoidable imperfection of their solutions. Feynman (1985, as cited in Eyler & Giles, 1999) points out that “the capacity to entertain doubt and yet forge ahead…rests on the qualities of critical thinking” (p. 159). With their ability to critically assess problems, students know that their actions in the community may not bring about the desired results in a clear cut way, but they are able to pursue reasonable solutions anyway. Critical thinking is a key element that allows students to address these ill-structured community problems and to challenge traditional structures in society that give some privilege while oppressing others.

**Civic Engagement**

In addition to the academic goals of higher education, institutions are often committed to fostering a sense of civic engagement in students.
Civic engagement is closely related to social justice and encompasses a variety of activities and values related to citizenship, ranging from voting in democratic processes to performing community service. Although often cited in the literature, effects of civic engagement can be hard to compare as people have very different definitions of the term. Eyler and Giles (1999) propose a model of citizenship based on five elements: values (“I ought to do”), knowledge (“I know what I ought to do and why”), skills (“I know how to do”), efficacy (“I can do, and it makes a difference”), and commitment (“I must and will do”) (p. 157). Research on this topic benefits from pre- and post-test measures of change in attitudes, as many students who choose service-learning options rank higher on citizenship values and views of social justice to begin with (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997).

Many students report an increased level of community connectedness after a semester of service-learning and the effect is strongest for those who perceive a community influence on their service projects (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Experiences in which community partners are seen as equal contributors to student learning, helping to shape the project according to their needs, have a greater influence on students’ relation to the community than those experiences in which community partners are seen as passive recipients of services. A sense of connection and community inclusion is an essential step in developing concern about social justice issues.

Because of their increased connection to the community, service-learning participants are also more likely than their nonservice-learning peers to value a commitment to service (Moely et al., 2002). Similar results have been found in research on student participation in community service. Astin and Sax (1998) found that volunteers showed increases in civic responsibility across all twelve variables they measured, including commitment to helping others, serving communities, influencing social values, and influencing political structure. In a longitudinal study of the effects of community service, these increases in civic engagement were sustained years after the service experience itself (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999). Although some changes in civic attitudes may occur simply because of the community service, integration of that service into a course through service-learning affects students above and beyond traditional volunteering on such measures as commitment to activism and choosing a service-related career. This indicates a lifelong commitment to service and social justice (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Research has shown that when students are asked to explicitly make connections to civic values,
civic engagement is enhanced more than if students are left to make connections on their own (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005), underlining the importance of intentionally drawing this link through reflection.

It is important to note, however, that some research has found that mandated service can actually foster negative feelings toward community service, such as perceiving the extra work more as a burden than an opportunity (Marks & Jones, 2004). To avoid this, practitioners can consider integrating service into a course as an alternative, for example, to a traditional research paper. With a bit of encouragement, students who might not have chosen to engage in volunteerism on their own can be exposed to personal and community benefits through service-learning, promoting participation in the future.

While the importance of volunteering should not be underscored, in order to truly change injustices that create the need for such services, underlying societal structures must be challenged. Service-learning students show an expansion in their understanding of social issues, shifting from individual explanations to broader systemic problems for the causes of inequality in the community (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Moely et al., 2002). Students are exposed to social justice issues in their service-learning placements that bring awareness of the systemic inequalities inherent in our society and can be encouraged to address them through political and social action. Many service-learning students do show an increase in valuing participation in political processes and importance placed on impacting the political system (Eyler & Giles, 1999). These values are essential to fostering participatory democracy and addressing unequal distribution of power and privilege in the system.

**Program Characteristics that Affect Student Outcomes**

Although the majority of the research on service-learning points to positive learning outcomes for participants, there are still some conflicting results. Discrepancy in the literature can be accounted for through an examination of the influence that different characteristics of service-learning programs have on student learning and development.

The most highly influential aspect of service-learning programs is the degree of integration between the community service component and course content (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hatcher, Bringle & Muthiah, 2004; Lambright & Lu, 2009). Students who indicate a lack of integration between their service experience and course materials rate the course as being of poorer quality and do not see the relevance of service to the
course (Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004). Highly involved faculty members, like those who spend time checking in with each student about the experiences at their sites, produce more positive student experiences, as increased faculty contact is one of the major student benefits of service-learning (Lambright & Yu, 2009). Faculty members who devote class time to making explicit links between students’ service and course material facilitate better quality service-learning experiences than those who do not provide that link.

One way to make the connection between course content and service is through reflection, as previously discussed. Reflection that is designed intentionally around the desired learning goals is most effective in achieving those goals, allowing the service piece and the classroom piece to “inform and reinforce the other” (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005, p. 49). Hatcher, Bringle, and Muthiah (2004) note that “through reflection, the community service can be studied and interpreted, much like a text is read and studied for deeper understanding” (p. 39). In this sense, community service is much like a textbook presenting course material, while reflection is the necessary link to facilitate student learning.

Service-learning is much more effective if community partners understand the goals and objectives of service-learning because they are able to support students and provide meaningful, relevant work. Community partners should be treated as co-educators as they have invaluable knowledge to share about their organization and the population they serve. Peterson (2009) states that “knowledge production typically has occurred within an intellectual vacuum in higher education, establishing clear divides between the knowers (the scientists, experts, and intellectuals) and the known (the community members seen as an object of study, not a source of knowledge)” (p. 548). Faculty and institutions should be careful not to, knowingly or unknowingly, convey that academic knowledge is of greater importance than community knowledge.

The best service-learning occurs when academia and community come together in a reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnership (Feldman et al., 2006). While it is important that service opportunities meet course goals, it is equally important that the service is necessary and beneficial to the organization. Poorly designed service-learning with no community input can actually perpetuate power dynamics, reinforcing stereotypes of those being served (Gallini & Moely, 2003), and putting community partners in an undue position of inferiority to the academy (Peterson, 2009). With good intentions but a lack of preparation, students often have the mentality...
they are going in to help the needy, saying things like “I want to change the world” or “I just want to help” (Peterson, 2009, p. 547). This mentality assumes a void or deficit in the community that service providers are to go in and fix. Alternatively, when students take an asset-based approach, they go to their sites to learn from community members and serve in the context of broader social justice issues, using what they learn in the community and in their classroom to affect real change. The goals of service-learning are realized when both parties learn and benefit from the relationship. Practitioners can consider these program characteristics when thinking about service-learning courses and plan accordingly.

**Considerations for Research and Practice**

Service-learning soared in popularity over the last couple of decades. Research has sought to provide data for what practitioners anecdotally know: service-learning is an effective pedagogical tool that enhances learning by allowing students to apply course material to real-life situations. Through structured reflection and thoughtfully planned projects, students learn about themselves as well as the world around them, gaining an appreciation for diversity and a drive for equity and justice.

Unfortunately, service-learning is not done well and the true benefits of service-learning are not realized. Faculty members often decide to integrate service-learning into their courses, and either the faculty or a service-learning staff person will seek out a community partner to whom they can propose a project. While not itself a problem, if the project is designed from the academic side with little input from the community partner, it could end up being more of a burden than a service to the community. There are assumptions, such as the academic calendar, that govern student projects, with students dropping in for a few months at a time and then leaving the organization for spring and winter breaks. Continuity is an issue, with college students coming and going each semester, but kids in a community afterschool program staying for longer durations of time. This is hard for community members such as children who could benefit from consistency and true relationship building. Faculty and service-learning staff should be cognizant of the assumptions inherent in academia and be up front and honest with community partners regarding the limitations of course-based service-learning. Students should also be made aware of these dynamics so they can learn about creating truly beneficial partnerships among different constituencies.

Recently, the trend in best practices and service-learning literature has
focused on including community voice more intentionally in the planning and implementation of service-learning projects. Stoecker and Tryon’s (2009) new book, *The Unheard Voices*, does for the community partner perspective of service-learning what Eyler & Giles’ (1999) book, *Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?*, did for the academic perspective a decade earlier. Stoecker and Tryon interviewed representatives from 67 experienced community-based organizations to expose both positive and negative community perspectives on service-learning. Overall, community organization staff valued service-learning; however, there are many ways in which practitioners can and should improve their practice based on recommendations in this book. Other literature has noted a shift from traditional to critical service-learning, with the latter explicitly focusing on social change, redistribution of power, and authentic relationships (Mitchell, 2008). As service-learning develops and matures, it seems refinement efforts will focus on creating mutually beneficial partnerships that equally empower campus and community constituencies while intentionally focusing students on social issues their service addresses.

One drawback of the research on service-learning is that it is almost entirely done by academics, who are often service-learning practitioners themselves. The voice of the literature is therefore naturally of the academy and not of the community. Although community partners may not have the time or resources to carry out large-scale research endeavors, service-learning as a field would benefit from research coming directly from the community partner staff and constituents it is purporting to serve (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Furthermore, practitioners have a vested interest in research showing positive benefits of a pedagogy they use in their own classrooms, not entirely ideal for an objective study. Considering these factors is crucial for practitioners to determine if service-learning is to become a long-term facet of higher education and not a passing trend.

When executed properly, service-learning benefits all parties involved. Community partners benefit from enthusiastic help, fresh perspectives, and transmitting their mission to potential social justice advocates. Students benefit personally, socially, and academically from engaging directly with material, enabling them to experience practical applications of what they learn, and working in diverse environments with committed advocates for change. Educators and institutions benefit because students are more invested in their work and gain a sense of responsibility and capability for affecting real change in society.
References


Promoting Social Justice Advocacy through Service Learning

