

# Policy Report

## SERVICE LEARNING AND OLDER ADULTS

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July 2001



**Center for Social Development  
Global Service Institute**



 **Washington**  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Youth and older adults are the most valuable sources of community volunteerism in the United States today. An important part of involving youth in service to others has been the proliferation and sophistication of service-learning programs that provide opportunities for meaningful engagement and reflection. Increasingly, service learning is recognized as an integral part of both community involvement and education, and youth are provided with growing opportunities to combine practice and knowledge. As this movement has developed, however, older adult volunteers have been largely excluded. Despite theory and observation that demonstrates older adults' desire to stay engaged in learning and service, programs providing them with structured opportunities are rare. After outlining the development and expansion of service-learning programs for youth in the United States, this paper asks the question, "Why not service learning for elders," analyzes some of the potential benefits of institutionalizing such an approach, and highlights promising efforts in the field.

## Service Learning and Older Adults

Service learning is sweeping the nation, revolutionizing education from preschool to post-graduate, and providing many youth with opportunities to meaningfully engage their communities and enhance their knowledge. At the same time, older adults are increasingly active themselves, serving as volunteers and helping to maintain many organizations struggling to meet pressing social needs. These two phenomena have yet to converge in a meaningful way, however, as seniors are mostly left out of structured service-learning opportunities. While older adults seldom participate in formal educational pursuits for academic credit, the primary locus of service-learning initiatives, they can certainly benefit from service learning's major goals: enhancing the service provided and adding to the participant's personal development. In addition, older adults are demonstrating through their involvement in organizations such as the Institutes for Learning in Retirement and Elderhostel that they are still learning and interested in building knowledge and skills, as they prove through volunteerism their commitment to serving their communities. What else do they have to do to become a part of this institution that is expanding youths' opportunity for personal development and providing communities with motivated, informed volunteers?

### What is Service Learning?

Service learning is a

“method whereby students (*here defined as those engaged in formal education*) learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of communities; Is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program; Helps foster civic responsibility; Is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum or education components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; And provides structured time for participants to reflect on the service experience” (Corporation for National Service, 1999).

Objectives of service learning are to enhance student learning by joining theory with experience and thought with action; prepare students for the future; enhance self-esteem, self-confidence, and civic/citizenship skills; give students the opportunity to do important work and expose them to societal injustices; fill unmet needs in the community; and assist agencies to better serve their clients with an infusion of enthusiastic volunteers (Cooper 2000). Components found in most service-learning programs include preparation for the service through study and discussion, involvement in a service project, and reflection on the service and the educational piece, both during and after participation. Service learning may include training in basic skills and knowledge to prepare the volunteer for work, but it surpasses this, providing also context relating to the social problem addressed and the opportunity for guided reflection during and after the service.

## **Brief History of the Development of Service Learning**

Service learning is an institutionalized part of community service opportunities for youth in the United States today. Aided by the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National Service Trust Act of 1993, proponents have millions of dollars in state, local, and federal aid and the blessing of school administrators and politicians to develop programs. Respected organizations like Learn and Serve America, a part of the Corporation for National Service, disseminate information about service learning, connect organizations and educational institutions who are involved in service learning, conduct evaluations, and fund service-learning projects. The service-learning movement has grown rapidly in the past seven years with efforts underway to build a worldwide network of scholars and practitioners (Silcox and Leek, 1997). In the U.S., service learning is increasingly national, with large programs linked to communicate about best practices and allow students to explore opportunities in other areas. For example, the Alternative Spring Break program involves a college/high school course where students study teamwork, leadership styles, and the social problems plaguing the area(s) to which they will travel. Then, supported by university and private funds, they spend spring break in another community, serving a local organization, and participating in dialogues to augment learning. Most programs require students to write both a research paper about a related issue and a reflection journal about their service. Students are encouraged to seek projects that connect with their own educational goals; they may take a trip, for example, that involves writing a newspaper for the homeless community (journalism) or working in an indigent health clinic (medicine).

In addition to these nationwide trends, the institutionalization of service learning into curriculums at secondary schools and universities around the country is developing a seamless system of service learning. Increasingly, students have opportunities to engage in praxis in all levels of education, building on past experiences to increase their capacity to learn, serve, and participate as they prepare for adulthood. While there still exists great disparity between theory and practical implementation, standardized models by which to judge success are increasingly accepted. Research critically examines “best practices” for service-learning programs for youth, ensuring that quality will improve as models are refined and shared. A growing focus on outcomes demands that service-learning programs demonstrate the impact that they have, not just on the student participants, but also on the community need addressed through service (Kahne and Westheimer, 1996). Academic journals dedicated exclusively to research on service learning provide practitioners with information about theories behind service learning and demonstrated outcomes for youth participants and communities. In journals today, scholars discuss such topics as critical pedagogy as a framework for service learning and the nexus between moral development and participation in service learning. Research and critical reflection aligned with developed theory, the hallmarks of sustainable, institutionalized phenomena in our society, are increasingly defining the field of service learning for youth. However, in all of these efforts, older adults are seriously underrepresented. To date, most service-learning programs that involve older adults use them as recipients of a service, rather than active participants (see for example, “How would you like to visit a nursing home<sup>i</sup>?”) Much of the blame for this disparity rests in the reliance that service-learning advocates have placed upon schools and universities as the sponsors of service learning. Without active engagement of community centers, nonprofit organizations, and other less-age-specific institutions in developing and implementing service-learning opportunities, it is harder to ensure that seniors

are included. It is essential that we examine the state of the field today and what can be learned from work with you to seek possibilities to include older adults in this important movement.

## **Service Learning and Youth Service**

### *University settings*

At institutions around the country, service-learning projects have been integrated with college courses including biology (community health and species preservation), fine arts (community presentations), anthropology (documenting community history), accounting (nonprofit finance, community credit unions), computer science (setting up programs for nonprofits), chemistry (lead paint tests), business (small business mentoring), education (tutoring and writing curriculum), and political science (conflict mediation) (“Service Learning Home on the Web,” 2001). Some courses are designed to mandate community service as a part of the grade; others provide opportunities for students to choose service instead of traditional academic work. Some universities are moving to require that professors integrate service learning into curriculum no matter the discipline, thus ensuring that all graduates will have participated in community service; some are even developing “stand alone” service-learning courses (“Service Learning Center at Michigan State,” 2000). Most studies report that students enjoy their participation and feel that service learning has enhanced their educational experience, but data is not yet available to verify the claims that service learning will result in graduates who are better-prepared for the workforce and more committed to service across the lifespan.

### *Primary and Secondary Schools*

While service learning was once limited to university study, young children are now involved as well. These programs may include connecting a recycling project with content about environmental conservation for fourth graders, linking work in a homeless shelter and study of poverty and housing policy in the U.S. in a seventh-grade civics class, or examination of the physical effects of aging and visits with frail elders for kindergartners. Learn and Serve America projects, a major source of innovation in service learning at the primary and secondary school levels, have been found to provide substantial service to communities at low cost, increase youth’s civic affiliation and participation in service; develop leadership; improve school performance, attendance, and discipline; and promote positive attitudes about learning and service (Brandeis University, 1999). Students report that service learning makes their coursework seem more relevant and increases their confidence. It may also influence post-graduation and career plans by exposing students to new opportunities. Districts across the country are implementing service learning, funded either through their own resources or through outside grants. Service-learning projects are also being added in alternative education settings, including high schools for troubled youth and classes for students with developmental disabilities (Jennings, 2001), and in some childcare and after-school programs.

The infusion of service-learning opportunities for students from kindergarten to college has truly revolutionized the concept of volunteerism for youth. Today, many leaders criticize volunteer programs for youth that are “just” community service, insisting instead that participants are provided with meaningful educational opportunities to enhance the experience (Burns, 1998). Advocates are realizing, it seems, that picking up trash in an empty lot seldom produces students who are committed to sustained service or understand the root causes of problems. Service learning addresses the inadequacies of earlier efforts to involve youth in service and opens important dialogue about youths’ contributions and potential. However, older adults are not offered the same opportunities to integrate learning with service. The structures and theories needed to support a service learning “revolution” in senior service are not materializing. As service learning for youth takes off with rapid speed, seniors are left behind.

## **Elder Service and Service Learning**

### *Growth of Elder Service*

Older adults are involved in community service in impressive and record numbers, making examination of the quality of these roles a timely endeavor. A 1999 Gallup survey found that 56 percent of the adult population volunteered during the past year (Independent Sector, 1999), a 13.7% increase from previous years. This marks the highest level of participation ever recorded. In 1999, US adults donated a remarkable total of 19.9 billion hours of labor (Independent Sector, 1999). People over age 55 are increasingly represented among these adult numbers. In 1996, 47 percent of people age 55 to 64, 43 percent of people age 65 to 74, and 37 percent of people over the age of 75 participated in volunteer work (US Bureau of the Census, 1996). In the last few years, an increase in volunteering among those over 75 has been noted, with up to 43 percent of these older Americans doing some volunteer work. Several studies provide evidence that although older volunteers are fewer in number compared to younger adults and youth, they invest more hours in the volunteer work they provide (Gallagher, 1994; Van Willigen, 2000). With older adults engaged to such extent in serving their communities, opportunities abound for enriching these experiences with service-learning opportunities. Some of the most commonly cited benefits of service learning for youth, reducing barriers between those serving and being served, enhancing service by providing context, promoting sustained involvement, and empowering volunteers to make decisions, are at least as applicable in senior service, if not more so. The question then becomes obvious,

### **Why not service learning for elders?**

#### *False conceptions that older adults have finished learning*

Service learning is not on the “radar screen” of many involved in elder service; while youth are naturally seen as learners, many practitioners have the false conception that older adults are no longer interested in developing capacity. Seniors’ participation in educational pursuits such as Elderhostel, OASIS computer classes, AARP seminars, and Institutes for Learning in Retirement, however, clearly refute this idea; many elders, obviously, are still interested in expanding their skill and knowledge base. Seniors themselves testify to their interest in learning. Surveys conducted by AARP reveal that over 90% of adults over age 50 want to continue

learning to keep pace with the world and to develop themselves (AARP, 2000). Continuity theory supports older adults' participation in educational activities as well. In fact, providing seniors with educational opportunities, according to continuity theory, will reduce the stresses of aging by allowing expression of one's natural self (Hooyman and Kiyak, 1999). Additionally, given that future cohorts of older adults will have higher education levels, tomorrow's seniors will be even more likely to remain involved in educational pursuits (Moody, 2000). As stated, such theoretical assertions are borne out by older adults actively continuing formal and informal education after retirement. Still, however false, conceptions of older adults as no longer learning may keep programs from offering service learning as an incentive for elder participation. Some organizations simply may feel that including learning is unnecessary to attract and retain older volunteers. Seniors' participation in volunteer opportunities without learning components has been taken by some as proof of this notion; to date, few efforts have sought to systematically ask seniors what their interests are in connecting educational and community service pursuits.

#### *Lack of experience in designing educational programs*

Implementation challenges are serious obstacles to adequately including older adults in service-learning programs. Some organizations working with seniors in service do not have the skills, knowledge, or resources to implement high-quality learning programs for volunteers. Service learning grew out of school settings, where the mission and orientation is to provide educational opportunities. This is not true for many elder service organizations, whose experience with education is often limited. Service learning's traditional connection to schools and universities means that community organizations have not had to learn to conduct the "learning" piece themselves; for older adults who lack connections to such educational institutions, opportunities for service learning are thus severely limited. However, the struggle of educators to learn how to implement service programs, the unfamiliar part for them, shows that training, dialogue, and technical assistance can overcome hurdles and help professionals to succeed in new tasks. National organizations such as Generations Together and the Center for Intergenerational Learning at Temple University have ample experience in designing training and service opportunities for older adults; adding content to enrich the service-learning experience should be the next step for such leaders.

#### *Lack of resources*

Providing meaningful service-learning opportunities requires more planning and effort than simply recruiting and training volunteers, and many nonprofits do not see the benefits of this extra investment. Seniors may be seen as more prepared for service than youth, with more vocational and life experience; therefore, organizations may see it as unnecessary to provide older adults with additional training and related content. Still, theory and the experiences of such organizations as Elderhostel suggest that older adults can benefit, as can the sponsoring organizations, from the power that comes with praxis. Hopefully, as more organizations begin to offer service-learning opportunities for older adults, others will feel more pressure to do so as well or risk losing sought-after volunteers.



### *Lack of interest in providing incentives/focus on altruism*

Historically, there has been a perspective that service should be done for purely altruistic reasons. Since learning provides a benefit to the volunteer, some may reject it as unnecessary or as distorting the “pure” motivations of older adults in service. However, in youth service, learning is seen not as a “reward” for service but as an integral part of the overall experience and an important component in ensuring quality. Service advocates have evolved beyond focusing on altruistic motives for community involvement among youth and now recognize the importance of providing development opportunities for both those serving and those being served. We must make this leap in elder service, as well, or risk perpetuating an ageist demand that seniors must volunteer without receiving any benefit in return. The increasing use of stipends in elder service indicates that the counterproductive idea of uncompensated service as the only worthwhile aim is losing favor among advocates, and learning opportunities can serve as innovative and attractive incentives for elder participation as well. Indeed, some elder service programs are using college credit or other educational activities, offered as vouchers or as a free service to volunteers, as incentives and rewards for participation. These programs have yet to be connected to the service in a meaningful way, however; for example, a volunteer in a tutoring program may receive free computer instruction, but without efforts to connect the service and learning in order to enhance both endeavors.

### **Why service learning for elders?**

Many of the rationales for doing service learning with older adults are the same used with youth. However, these should be articulated with specific reference to seniors in order to highlight their unique circumstances, needs, and strengths.

### *Improves service*

Programs such as Elderhostel find that providing older adults with information about the service they will perform helps empower volunteers to make decisions and increases both the connection they feel to those who they are serving and the likelihood that they will stay connected with service after finishing the project (Goggin, 2001). The model of praxis, where education, service, and reflection are combined to create something truly more significant than any of the parts, is applicable to older adults as well as to others. For example, it is hard to imagine that an elder volunteer who has information about the state of public education today, the demographics and challenges of a school she is serving, and the macroeconomic trends affecting families will not be a better mentor than one without this preparation. Such information would also reduce the extent to which community agencies have to deal with volunteers who are unsure of what to do, lack sensitivity to the issues, and need substantial supervision. Service learning may reduce volunteer turnover as well, although this connection has yet to be demonstrated with senior volunteers. Older adults who have the opportunity to reflect on their service during and afterwards will be able to critically examine their involvement, make improvements, and integrate the experience into their lives.

### *Attracts more participants/ incentive to serve*

In Elderhostel programs, universities, and senior centers nationwide, older adults are demonstrating their desire to continue learning into later life. Therefore, providing educational opportunities as a part of service (i.e. history of U.S. reservation policy to prepare for work with Native American children, study of endangered species during an environmental Elderhostel trip, or construction and design skills for a community development project) can serve as an incentive for participation. Older adults should be consulted in the development of service-learning programs to provide input on the types of educational opportunities they desire, the learning format that most appeals to them, and their preferred style of reflection. Such collaboration will minimize the strain on agencies developing the service-learning programs (seniors can design much of the learning component themselves) and maximize participant satisfaction.

### *Enhances learning and productivity in later life*

Service learning has important implications beyond its impact on any one senior's life. It is essential, as the U.S. deals with a rapidly growing older population, that we maintain and enhance opportunities for older adults to be actively engaged as productive members of society. Towards this end, providing meaningful, educationally-integrated service opportunities is clearly preferable to "keeping elders busy" in menial volunteer tasks. AARP surveys have found that seniors prefer to learn by watching, doing, and reflecting (AARP, 2000). Thus, service learning seems an appropriate and effective tool for helping older adults to develop capacity. With the new skills and knowledge they gain through service learning, it is likely that seniors, like youth, will be better citizens of the total society, more engaged in other personal development activities, and more likely to continue volunteering. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we should be concerned with maximizing the growth, development, and engagement of all our citizens, and older adults undeniably have more to learn in this new age.

## **What is the State of Service Learning for Seniors?**

### *Elderhostel Experience*

Elderhostel (EH) has included learning components from the beginning in keeping with its mission to provide enriching educational opportunities for older adults. The service programs (with their learning components) have been a part of Elderhostel for seven years. EH partners with nonprofit organizations that provide the service opportunities and present their plans for incorporating learning components. Because most EH programs last approximately one week, the partners must develop an intense opportunity; most indicate that this requires considerable investment but is worth it because of the support provided by EH participants (Goggin, 2001). Especially important in time-limited interactions, learning helps volunteers to understand the impact of their service and to maintain a connection with the community. EH requires that at least one-third of the participants' time be spent learning. Education must be integrated into service so that participants have ongoing opportunities to ask questions, reflect on their work, and focus on their interests. This education includes explaining the context in which the service occurs and providing some information before beginning. Some sites bring stakeholders to discuss context with volunteers; for example, local government officials may discuss the

impoverished neighborhood and efforts to improve conditions there (Goggin, 2001). Examples of service-learning opportunities through EH include tutoring schoolchildren on Native American reservations, working with endangered species, and participating in Habitat for Humanity construction projects, all of course with accompanying educational content. EH is obviously providing important leadership and valuable service-learning opportunities for older adults, but its programs are limited due to their detachment from one's local community and the tuition needed to enroll, which is a barrier to widespread participation.

### *Training for Senior Service Corps (SSC)*

Some Elderhostel personnel are providing service-learning training to directors from the Senior Service Corps (Goggin, 2001). It is the hope of the SSC that directors will begin exploring service-learning opportunities within the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (matches seniors with community organizations needing long-term volunteers), Senior Companion (peer support program matching frail and well elders), and Foster Grandparent (seniors work with at-risk students in schools and community settings) programs, in order to strengthen these programs and enrich the experience of participants.

### *Institutes for Learning in Retirement (ILRs)*

The Institutes for Learning in Retirement are rich resources for educational opportunities for seniors. There are approximately 300 Institutes around the country, some of which have been active for more than 30 years (Elderhostel Institute Network, 2000). These programs are connected to universities (which provide them with space and student privileges) but are self-governed and often peer-taught. While only a few of the Institutes currently have service-learning components, there is clearly great potential for increasing the service involvement of these active older adults. Especially given that service and service learning are increasing rapidly on campuses around the country, attention is needed to examine connections between the Institutes and their host universities and to explore opportunities to implement meaningful service programs as a part of the Institutes' curriculum. Perhaps, even without expanding service learning beyond college campuses, older adults can be more included through outreach from universities and policies that promote meaningful roles for seniors within credit and/or noncredit courses that involve service learning. ILRs would be an excellent tool with which to begin such exploration.

### *Life Options Centers*

Life Options Centers are part of a new initiative proposed by Civic Ventures to provide people with flexible options for integrating employment, service, education, and family responsibilities across the lifespan (Goggin, 2001). This new orientation to alternative arrangements comes out of the health and longevity "revolution" in the U.S. and other countries' experiences with more flexible opportunities along the life course (i.e. United Kingdom). While not operational yet, these centers will be physical places for adults to explore new careers, study, acquire new skills, connect with service opportunities, and socialize. They will be self-governed and usually self-taught, with participating members choosing classes and service projects themselves. Life Option Centers will be open to adults of all ages and will seek to fill the institutional gap in the

productive aging agenda by providing structures to support what individuals are wanting: more opportunities to develop and apply their capacities (Weiner, 2001).

Service learning is increasingly proving its worth to educators and youth advocates around the country. Given information about service learning's impact on leadership development, personal enrichment, and potential to improve service and connection to community, it is important to include elder volunteers, a major source of energy and talent among nonprofit organizations today, in these discussions and developments. Elder service advocates must begin to critically examine service learning and its potentials for elder volunteers, and older adults themselves should be included in these important discussions. The efforts underway should be supported and monitored, while new opportunities are sought. Without this examination, an exciting possibility for enticing more senior volunteers, improving their service, and enriching lives may be lost.

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