

Service as a Developmental Opportunity

Building Connections for Vulnerable Youths

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Emerging adulthood, roughly the years between 18 and 30, has become a protracted period. Compared to earlier eras, it takes longer for young people today to complete their education, find steady work, and start their families (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005). Achieving these markers of adult status has become more challenging for young adults in general and particularly difficult for those young people whose families cannot provide the necessary financial support and social connections (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth 2005).

Our study focuses on youths who may be marginalized from mainstream opportunities and connections, and thus a group for whom the transition to adulthood is likely to present special challenges. We address whether engagement in service may have beneficial effects that would better facilitate their transition to adulthood. These benefits of service could include connecting adolescents to positive adult role models in whom they can confide, reinforcing their educational aspirations, exposing them to a wider range of social networks, and fostering their motivation for and engagement in civic affairs.

The Importance of Social Networks During the Transition to Adulthood

Evidence has shown that families provide the major support for young adults as they negotiate their transition to full adulthood, and that youths whose families have fewer financial resources and social connections face greater struggles. This is most apparent with respect to the financial support parents offer through providing tuition payments, food, and housing (Schoeni and Ross 2005). Families in the top quarter of earned incomes provide three times more financial assistance to their children than families

from the bottom quarter. Parents also provide their young-adult children with emotional support and guidance about how to negotiate the challenges of adulthood (Collins 2001; Roberts and Bengtson 1993) and provide social connections that lead to opportunities for education and employment.

Service as a Way to Connect with Adults and Build Social Networks

For youths whose families are unable to provide sufficient support to guide them through their transitions to adulthood, institutions need to provide the necessary supports. Engaging in service can offer opportunities for youths to connect with adults who can help them scaffold their transition into adulthood. Adults can also provide youths with guidance in terms of how to balance their individual cultural traditions with values of the dominant culture (Raudenbush and Hall 2003). By mentoring youths, adults provide positive

social relationships, help young people build cognitive skills, and promote identity development (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, and Noam 2006). With the support and guidance of adults, adolescents can more effectively frame a positive purpose for their lives and chart concrete directions for how to achieve their goals. Without such guidance, the challenges of completing education and finding remunerative employment can become impossible hurdles for more vulnerable youths (Osgood et al. 2005).

Service as a Way to Find Direction and Purpose in Life

In general, service may provide unique developmental opportunities for those transitioning to adulthood, but may be especially helpful to those youths with fewer connections to mainstream opportunities and institutions. Service projects that include developmental opportunities similar to the external assets described by the Search

Institute (2006) provide opportunities for participants to decide on a direction and purpose for their lives that is consistent with their values (Flanagan and Syvertsen 2005).

Developmental opportunities are experiences that promote more positive outcomes by connecting young people with adults, encouraging them to reflect on their service experiences, and giving them the opportunity to apply new skills. Longitudinal work done by Johnson, Beebe, Mortimer, and Snyder (1998) has shown that after engaging in volunteer work, high school students reflect upon and adjust their priorities for the future. The same study found that young people have higher intrinsic motivation for work and a lower individualistic focus on their careers after participating in service activities. As Johnson et al. followed these youths into early adulthood, they found that they had often formed habits of voluntarism and considered it important to participate in community life. A separate study has shown that institutional opportunities also matter as ways of encouraging youths to engage with their communities. School enrollment increased the likelihood of volunteering, whereas out of school employment decreased the likelihood of volunteering (Oesterle, Johnson, and Mortimer 2004).

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Service as a Way to Empower the Disempowered and to Connect the Disconnected

Other work shows that, for at-risk youths typically targeted by prevention programs, opportunities to engage in service may help develop a sense of efficacy and an awareness that they can make significant contributions. In a study designed to reduce teenage pregnancy, school suspension, and course failure, part of the treatment group's program included service, classroom discussions about service projects, and discussions about adolescent developmental tasks. This intervention was designed to provide adolescents with the opportunity to take on positive roles while learning the skills to become competent adults. The program's success in reducing problem behaviors by more than 50 percent was attributed to the volunteer service students performed and the autonomy they gained through service (Allen, Philliber, Herrling, and Kuperminc 1997).

Inequality of Opportunity for Civic Engagement

In the current study, our focus on marginalized youths stems from a concern that civic opportunities are divided along class lines. Over the past several decades, conventional measures of political participation like voting

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and newspaper readership have declined despite an increase in overall education levels. The increasing gap in civic participation mimics the growing divide between the haves and the have-nots in the U.S. Since 1999, the civic gap (both in terms of political participation and community engagement) between high school and college graduates has widened, and among high school dropouts there has been a precipitous drop in civic participation over the past 30 years (National Conference on Citizenship 2006).

If young people are to become fully participating citizens, they need to feel that they matter, that their voices and opinions count. Opportunities for having a voice and participating in community affairs are lower for urban youths living in areas of concentrated poverty than for their peers living in middle-class communities (Hart and Atkins 2002). Not only are those youths less likely to participate in service, but they also have lower levels of civic knowledge as compared to affluent youths (Atkins and Hart 2003). Such gaps in civic opportunities and competencies are due not only to the fewer financial resources available but also to the lower

ratio of adults to youths in impoverished areas. Youths growing up in child-saturated communities have fewer adults with whom to interact. This decreases the possibility of their interacting with adults who can model healthy civic behaviors; it also limits the availability of community-based youth programs (Hart and Atkins 2002).

In addition to reduced civic opportunities within communities, service participation is unequally distributed across communities that vary in their social and economic resources, and are experiencing changing demographics. Findings from the *Growing to Greatness 2004* national survey of U.S. public school principals show that schools serving more low-income students are less likely to offer service-learning, and tend to involve fewer students in service-learning, than do schools with fewer low-income students (Scales and Roehlkepar-tain 2004). Pritzker and McBride (2006) found that urban schools with high rates of poverty were more likely to have part-time service-learning coordinators, have more support for teachers, and receive external support for service-learning programs compared to the growing number of high-

poverty schools in suburban communities. Convergent evidence suggests that opportunities for social connectedness and civic participation for youths is unevenly distributed.

Method

We conducted secondary analyses of data collected by Harris Interactive for the National Youth Leadership Council's Growing to Greatness: The State of Service-Learning Project in December 2005.¹ Two sources of data (surveys and focus groups) were used in the analyses. The survey was conducted online and completed by a nationally representative sample of 3,123 U.S. adults ages 18 to 28. The data were weighted to be representative of the total U.S. adult population on the basis of region, age within gender, education, household income, race/ethnicity, and propensity to be online. All reported statistics are estimates from the weighted data. In addition to the survey, focus groups were conducted in two large metropolitan cities with young adults who did service-learning but did not participate in the online survey.

All of the data are cross-sectional, which limits our ability to make causal arguments about the effects of service on the transition to adulthood. That is, participants in the

study were all young adults when they filled out the surveys. In the survey, they were asked about their current activities and attitudes as young adults. In addition, they were asked to reflect back on their K-12 years and report on their high school service experiences (or lack thereof). Our analyses focus on a subset of the survey participants who faced challenges as youths that we expect would have made the transition to adulthood more difficult.

“At-Risk” Defined

Youths at risk were defined as those who answered yes to at least two of the following four items, which focused on their situation while in high-school:

- (a) earning lower grades [B's and C's and below]
- (b) not living with both biological parents
- (c) living in a family that faced financial hardship
- (d) as a high school student, working 20 or more hours per week

Based on these responses, 1,096 respondents were classified as being “at risk” during their high school years. Of these respondents, 877 reported that they had engaged in some type of service before age 18, and 219 reported having no service experience. Service could

have been done as part of school, through youth organizations (religious-affiliated or otherwise), through another organization, or on one's own.²

Results

We explored first the nature of the at-risk students' service experiences with particular attention to the developmental opportunities of service that might scaffold their transition to adulthood. Following that, regression analyses were conducted on outcomes in the young adult years comparing those young people who reported some service experience before 18 years old with their peers who reported no such experience. Outcomes explored in this study included: educational achievement and aspirations; civic values (i.e., the importance they attached to voting in elections, keeping informed on current events); political voice (i.e., the extent to

¹ The NYLC survey asked respondents who indicated they had participated in service if their service included one or more of 14 attributes. The attributes were based on the Essential Elements of Effective Service-Learning Practice and were used as a way to assess the degree of service-learning quality. One of the attributes, reflection, was used as the way to distinguish service from service-learning. For a full list of attributes, see the appendix. Only 266 marginalized youth were in this category. Because the focus of this paper is the developmental opportunities of service, we expanded our parameters to include all participants who did service, regardless of service type and looked at several developmental opportunities including reflection.

² N.B. Students who have been in special education classes were no more likely to perform service than to not perform service, indicating that there were equal service opportunities for special education students.

which they had discussed politics or played a leadership role in their communities during the last 12 months); the diversity of their social networks (i.e., how much they socialized with individuals of another race or ethnic group); and their civic goals (i.e., intentions to get involved in their communities in the next two years).

Finally, regression analyses were conducted on the 877 individuals who had engaged in some type of service before reaching 18 years of age and met the criteria for being at risk. These analyses compared those who had engaged in service-learning (for the purpose of this study defined as those who reported a reflection component as part of their service) with their peers who did not report a reflection component associated with their service. In addition to reflection, we examined the following aspects of reported service experiences: working directly with people in the community; meeting people from different economic, racial or cultural backgrounds; working with teachers or adult leaders who set high expectations; and meeting adults they could go to if in need of help. We chose these developmental opportunities because we expected that they would be related to educational and civic outcomes in the young adult years.

CONNECTING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CARING ADULTS

We reasoned that one important developmental opportunity of community service is that it can connect young people with caring adults who provide guidance. Respondents to the survey were asked a series of questions about the number of adults they could go to for help. In addition, focus group participants were asked to discuss their service experience generally and the benefits it had for them. In the following section, we integrate results from the survey with comments from the focus group participants that speak to the formative role that adults who guide youths' service experience can play in their lives.

Of the 1,096 participants who qualified as at risk, regardless of whether they participated in service or not, 41 percent said they had fewer than three adults they could go to for help, and 59 percent said they had three or more such adults. About 9 percent of respondents said they had no adults at all to whom they could turn for help. Ethnic minority youth were just as likely as white youth to report that they had adults they could go to for help.

When asked specifically about their service experiences, more than one-quarter of the respondents reported meeting adults

through their service experiences to whom they could turn for help. Those who did service were 2.25 times more likely than their peers who did no service to report having at least one adult they could go to for help. This matters because adults with knowledge about and connections in the mainstream can help young people navigate the system. The following quotes from two young adult males who participated in the focus groups illustrate how adults can connect young people to educational and work opportunities:

Mrs. Jones sat me down and talked to me. I was probably going to take a year off [before college], but then thought I might as well try and I stuck to it. The [service] project probably had something to do with it. ... Mrs. Jones helped me with my resume; she got me my first job in retail.

There was a kid in junior high who was going to fail out. ... I mentored him and it turned out his mom was on the School Board. ... The kid passed [and] his mom helped me get into the college I wanted to go to.

INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL OR WORK

Next, we looked at whether the young adults, at the time they completed the survey, were either enrolled in school or employed in a job. Involvement in school or work are typical indicators of social connectedness. In contrast, being unemployed and not

participating in education or other training decreases opportunities for social connectedness and participation in the larger society. Less than an estimated 9 percent of the sample were disconnected, that is, unemployed and neither currently in a post-high school education program nor finished with such a program. Engaging in service before 18 years of age minimized the likelihood of individuals being disconnected as young adults. Those who had engaged in service while in school were 1.70 times more likely to be connected (enrolled in school and/or employed) than their peers who had not engaged in service.

Participants also reported other positive aspects of service experiences that had afforded them with civic learning opportunities. For example, more than 68 percent reported working directly with people in the community, while more than 59 percent reported meeting people from different racial and economic backgrounds, and 71

percent thought their project was important for the group it served. About 54 percent of youths who did service said their teachers or adult leaders had high expectations for them. One focus group participant explained that service was “a chance to give back to the world, because I was given so much. I want to help because I was helped.” Another noted, “I think about things differently now. This isn’t about me, it is about other people.”

SERVICE AS A PREDICTOR OF POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR AT-RISK YOUTHS

To explore the question as to whether service was associated with a more positive transition to adulthood for young people who faced adversity, we ran linear regression models on the set of outcomes in young adulthood. The outcomes included the respondent’s educational attainment (how far they had gone in school), their educational aspirations (how much education they planned to achieve), a set of outcomes tapping their civic values

(the importance they attached to such things as voting in elections or keeping informed on current events), the degree to which they had exercised their political voice by being involved in their communities over the last 12 months, the racial/ethnic diversity of their social networks, and their civic goals (their plans for community involvement in the next two years).³

Six variables were entered as predictors in the regression analyses: (a) sex, (b) age, (c) ethnicity (white/ethnic minority), (d) having no positive adult role models, (e) having no adults one can go to for help, and (f) involvement in service work in high school. The results are shown in Table 1.

In predicting civic engagement outcomes, there was little difference between women and men, except for one measure. Women were more likely than men to say that they exercised their political voice (-.14 in the column for Exercise Political Voice). With respect to education, men reported higher levels of educational attainment than women. As expected, age was related to education with older participants reporting that they had attained more education as indicated by a positive beta value in the Educational Attainment column and also reporting

Those who had engaged in service while in school were 1.7 times more likely to be connected (enrolled in school and/or employed) than their peers who had not.

³ Constructs, based on factor analyses, were developed based on means of the item scores.

TABLE 1
Regression Analyses of Education, Civic Values, and Behaviors for At-Risk Participants

Variables	Educational Attainment ^c	Educational Aspirations ^d	Civic Values ^e	Exercising Political Voice ^f	Diverse Social Networks ^g	Future Civic Goals ^h	TABLE
	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	β (SE)	
Sex ^a	.02(.06)*	.00(.08)	.01(.06)	-.14(.06)*	.12(.06)*	-.02(.06)	^a Women = 0, Men = 1
Age	.04(.01)***	-.06(.01)***	.02(.01)*	.00(.01)	-.04(.01)***	.00(.01)	^b White = 0, Ethnic Minority = 1
Race ^b	.03(.06)	.13(.08)	.07(.06)	.07(.06)*	.21(.06)***	.10(.06)	^c R ² = 0.02
Role models	.22(.10)	.02(.13)	.37(.10)***	.27(.10)***	.33(.10)**	.36(.10)***	^d R ² = 0.06
Adults for help	-.16(.11)	-.65(.14)***	.30(.11)**	.12(.11)	.38(.11)***	.11(.11)	^e R ² = 0.07
Service	-.13(.07)	.51(.10)***	.45(.07)***	.62(.08)***	.35(.07)***	.81(.07)***	^f R ² = 0.08
							^g R ² = 0.10
							^h R ² = 0.13

* p < .05
 ** p < .01
 *** p < .001

NOTE: All predictor variables are listed on the left; all outcome variables are listed across the top. Statistical significance for each outcome is indicated by the asterisks. Positive or negative effects on outcome variables are indicated by positive or negative signs before each number.

higher levels for civic values. However, younger participants had higher educational aspirations and more diverse social networks, as indicated by their negative beta values. Compared to white respondents, ethnic minorities were more likely to report that they had exercised their political voice during the previous 12 months and were more likely to interact with ethnically diverse social networks, but did not differ from white participants on measures of education, civic values, or future civic goals.

A pattern of lower civic engagement was evident for young people who had no positive adult role models or who lacked adults to whom they could turn for help. Compared to their peers who had adult role models, those who lacked such models had lower measures of civic values and future goals, were less civically involved in their communities in the previous 12 months, and had less ethnically diverse social networks. Youths who did not have adults they felt they could turn to for help were less likely to endorse civic values,

and had less ethnically diverse social networks, than youths who reported having such adult connections. These results suggest that youths without connections to adults are less likely to have opportunities for (or interest in) civic engagement.

In the regression models, participation in service before 18 years of age was associated with positive outcomes in early adulthood. Engaging in service was positively related to young adults' civic values and future civic

TABLE 2
Regression Analyses of Education, Civic Values, and Behaviors for Service and Service-Learning At-Risk Participants

Variables	Educational Attainment ^c β (SE)	Educational Aspirations ^d β (SE)	Civic Values ^e β (SE)	Exercising Political Voice ^f β (SE)	Diverse Social Networks ^g β (SE)	Future Civic Goals ^h β (SE)	TABLE
Sex ^a	-.08(.07)	-.12(.09)	-.11(.08)	-.26(.08)**	.16(.07)*	-.16(.08)	^a Women = 0, Men = 1
Age	.03(.01)**	-.04(.01)*	.02(.01)	.02(.01)	-.02(.01)*	.01(.01)	^b White = 0, Ethnic Minority = 1
Race ^b	-.03(.07)	.23(.09)*	.12(.07)	.12(.08)	.22(.07)**	-.01(.08)	^c R ² = 0.02
Role models	.16(.16)	-.31(.20)	.46(.16)**	.04(.18)	.34(.15)*	.10(.17)	^d R ² = 0.05
Adults for help	-.07(.15)	-.34(.19)	.17(.16)	-.03(.17)	.31(.14)*	.07(.16)	^e R ² = 0.06
Reflection	.09(.08)	.32(.10)*	.25(.08)**	.40(.09)***	.24(.07)**	.30(.08)**	^f R ² = 0.08
Other developmental opportunities	-.05(.11)	-.31(.14)*	.16(.11)	.34(.12)**	.25(.10)*	.56(.12)***	^g R ² = 0.09
							^h R ² = 0.08

* p < .05
 ** p < .01
 *** p < .001

NOTE: All predictor variables are listed on the left; all outcome variables are listed across the top. Statistical significance for each outcome is indicated by the asterisks. Positive or negative effects on outcome variables are indicated by positive or negative signs before each number.

goals, with exercising one's political voice, and with the ethnic diversity of one's social networks. Although service was unrelated to young adults' current educational attainment, it was positively related to their educational aspirations. Further analysis may be needed, due to the low r-square for educational attainment outcomes as noted in Table 1. Taken together, these results point to the positive potential of service for marginalized youths with respect to sustaining their connections to diverse others and nurturing their desire to contribute to and have voice in the affairs of their communities. The results also show a strong link between youths' relationships with adults and their civic engagement.

ATTRIBUTES OF QUALITY SERVICE-LEARNING AS PREDICTORS OF POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Another set of regression analyses were run focusing only on the 877 marginalized youths who had engaged in some type of service before 18 years old. In these analyses we looked at attributes of the service experience that we regard as developmental opportunities which should relate to positive educational and civic outcomes in young adulthood. The first of these developmental opportunities was reflection, measured in the data by the respondents' reports of whether

reflection for a class or group had been part of their service experience. (In the NYLC data set reflection was used to define service-learning.) The variable measuring other developmental opportunities of engaging in service was based on the sum of four items. Youths who engaged in service could receive a score from 1–4 based on the number of affirmative responses they gave to the following items: (a) I worked directly with people in the community; (b) I met people from different economic, racial or cultural backgrounds from my own; (c) The teachers or adult leaders set high expectations; and (d) I met adults I would go to if I were in trouble or needed help. The regression models were run with the same outcome variables shown in Table 1.

Of the 877 marginalized youths who did service, an estimated 15 percent did not report any reflection component or any of the other four developmental opportunities (worked directly with people in the community; met people from different economic, racial or cultural backgrounds; teachers or adult leaders set high expectations; met adults they could go to if in trouble or needing help). Forty-two percent of the 877 youths had engaged in service-learning (they reported a reflection component) and 90 percent of the 877 youths reported at least

one of the other developmental opportunities. The results of the regression analyses are shown in Table 2.

Reflection on the service experience in high school was positively associated with civic outcomes (civic values and goals, diverse social networks, and the exercise of political voice in youth adulthood). In addition, the developmental opportunities included in high school students' service experiences were linked to their endorsement of civic goals, participation in diverse ethnic networks as young adults, and exercise of political voice. Neither reflection nor other developmental opportunities had an effect on young adults' educational attainment; however, both reflection and developmental opportunities were linked with educational aspirations. As in Table 1, further analysis may be needed, due to the low r-square for educational attainment outcomes. Reflection was positively associated with educational aspirations and developmental opportunities were negatively associated. However, engaging in reflection before age 18 was significantly related to all four of the civic outcomes in young adulthood. Taken together, these results indicate that a reflection component to service work as well as other developmental opportunities are linked with positive civic outcomes in young adulthood.

The presence of adults appears to be a necessary ingredient for providing service opportunities for youths and improving their transitions to adulthood.

Conclusions

The transition to adulthood can be difficult, particularly for youths whose families cannot provide financial support, connections to educational and work opportunities, or advice about how to navigate the changing social terrain. New avenues of inclusion and connection are needed. The results discussed in this paper suggest that service can be such an avenue. The focus group and survey participants related the positive effects of service.

More than half of respondents who did some service said that through their service projects they were able to work directly with individuals in the community and meet individuals from different racial and economic backgrounds. Youths who engaged in service were more likely than those who did not to have adult role models and to have adults to whom they could turn for help. Relationships with adults are an important part of transitioning to adulthood because adults have the experiences, resources, and connections that youths need. Service also

created opportunities for youths to look beyond themselves and participate in society. Engaging in service before age 18 was related to having positive civic values and behaviors in the young adult years. Young adults who had engaged in service were more likely to be integrated into institutions (work or school) rather than disconnected from them.

Unequal distribution of service opportunities, however, is cause for concern. Youths from low-poverty areas may already be on a successful trajectory and may have families that can sufficiently support their transitions to adulthood. For youths who attend schools in high-poverty areas, access to service opportunities may be more limited. In addition, more flexible models of service may be called for. High school students whose families are financially unstable, students who combine work with their schooling, and those who do carework in their families may find it difficult to fit service hours into their “free time.”

The presence of adults appears to be a necessary ingredient for providing service

opportunities for youths and improving their transitions to adulthood. Adults facilitate this transition by helping youths navigate the routes to higher education and employment, by connecting them with opportunities, and by expecting young people to meet high standards. Without these mentoring relationships, youths may not receive the emotional support and guidance they need to successfully transition into adult roles.

During the past two decades, there has been a shift in the field of adolescent and youth development from a “youth at risk” to a “youth as assets” paradigm, emphasizing the contributions young people make to their communities. This positive approach to youth development has insisted that all young people, including those whose families are impoverished, whose schools are of low quality, or who in other ways do not enjoy abundant resources, are assets to society. The challenge is to ensure that all youths have caring adults and institutional opportunities that enable them to actualize their potential. Service that includes necessary developmental opportunities creates a context in which young people can develop their skills, helps them build relationships with adults, and encourages them to develop their own identities as active and contributing members of society.

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