

**A Preliminary Overview of the Literature  
Linking Service-Learning and Retention**

**Campus Compact National Office  
January, 2006**

## **A. Studies Evaluating the Overall Impact of Service-Learning on Retention**

**Astin, Alexander, Vogelsgang, Lori J., Ikeda, Elaine K., Yee, Jennifer A. , (2000). *How Service Learning Affects Students*, Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.**

<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/PDFs/HSLAS/HSLAS.PDF>

Summary:

This quantitative longitudinal study explores the comparative effects of service learning and community service on the cognitive and affective development of college undergraduates and examines how learning is enhanced by service. There is no explicit connection drawn to student retention. Data could potentially be used to support the argument that service learning impacts faculty/student and student/student interaction, which therefore leads to increased integration and, ultimately, higher retention rates.

Quotes:

“...Service learning and community service enhance student development in part because they increase the odds that students will interact with each other and experience personal support from professors.” (33)

“Compared to community service, taking a service-learning course is much more likely to generate...student-to-student discussions.” (iii)

**Braxton, John M., (2000). *The Influence of Active Learning on the College Student Departure Process: Toward a Revision of Tinto’s Theory*. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71 (5) 567-590.**

Summary:

In this article, Braxton looks at the relationship between active learning and college student departure rates. He studies 718 first-time, full-time, first-year students. He comes to the conclusion that active learning does influence social integration, which (based on Tinto’s theory) is a factor in student departure decisions.

Quotes:

“The findings of this study offer some support for the role of active learning in influencing student persistence/departure decisions. Put differently, faculty

classroom behaviors play a role in the student departure process... Moreover, the pattern of findings of this inquiry indicate that faculty classroom behaviors in general and active learning in particular may constitute an empirically reliable source of influence on social integration, subsequent institutional commitment, and departure decisions.” (581-582)

**Eyler, Janet, Giles, Jr. Dwight E., Braxton, John, The Impact of Service-Learning on College Students (1999). In M. Cathy Sullivan (Ed.), *Service-Learning: Educating Students for Life* (pp.19-39). Harrisonburg, VA: Institute for Research in Higher Education.**

Summary:

This study has found that students who choose service-learning differ from those who do not in the target attitudes, skills, values and understanding about social issues. Also, participation in service-learning has an impact on those outcomes over the course of a semester. Again, there is no explicit discussion of retention, but higher rates of interaction with faculty could be used to argue this point.

An interesting element of this study is the finding that students who voluntarily choose service-learning classes vary greatly from those students who do not, and are predisposed to show positive development of traits like tolerance. This study would be particularly effective evidence for those advocating mandatory service-learning courses, as that may be the only way to engage those not already predisposed towards service.

Quotes:

“Service learning itself may...facilitate faculty-student relationships. It may provide opportunities for students to work closely with faculty members and to know them well, and this may have further long-term benefits on student development.” (36)

**Keup, Jennifer R. (2005). The Impact of Curricular Interventions on Intended Second-Year Enrollment. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 7 (1-2), 61-89.**

Summary:

This quantitative study of 19,995 first-time, full-time, first-year students explores the relationships between three curricular interventions—first-year seminars, service-learning, and learning communities—and first- and second-year retention. The findings show that there are many positive relationships between these three interventions and integrative first-year experiences as defined by Tinto’s (1987, 1993) longitudinal model

of departure. Logistic regression also suggests that service-learning courses have an indirect impact on the decision to re-enroll for a second year of college.

Quotes:

“...Service-learning seems to facilitate good academic practices that, in turn, positively impact the intent to return for a second year.” (77)

“...these data suggest that service-learning facilitates the intention to re-enroll for a second year of college by its ability to enhance the quality and quantity of faculty interaction and to promote positive academic experiences for students in their adjustment to college in the first year.” (82)

“In addition, these results offer evidence that service-learning has evolved as an effective first-year practice and provide a model for future studies of this program on the institutional and national levels, particularly in their investigation of indirect effects.” (82)

“Students who participate in service-learning, first-year seminars, and learning communities appear to be far more likely to interact with faculty both inside and outside of class, feel “completely successful” getting to know faculty, and work with a professor on a research project. (73)

**Mundy, Meghan, Eyler, Janet, (2002). *Service-Learning and Retention: Promising Possibilities, Potential Partnerships*, Vanderbilt University.**

Summary:

This paper presents an argument for addressing a direct relationship between service-learning and retention theory. It presents ten guidelines that combine what is known about service-learning and retention to inform and extend both. It provides a great deal of rationale for why we should look for a measurable link between the two theories, but does no research to prove such a link actually exists.

This paper is a solid overview of retention theory and the ways in which it parallels retention theory. For this reason, it's a good background reference for those looking to understand the connections between the two ideas—but not a source of conclusive evidence.

Quotes:

“Design service-learning projects to maximize interaction for students of diverse backgrounds—Eyler and Giles (1999) note that the most frequently reported value of service-learning was the opportunity to interact in meaningful ways with people from diverse backgrounds. Service-learning creates opportunities for

developing close personal relationships among students. Additionally, Levine and Cureton (1998) describe the potential that collaborative work has for students of diverse backgrounds in breaking down segregation on campus, hence promoting social integration.”

**Swail, Watson Scott with Redd, Kenneth E. and Perna, Laura W. (2003). Retaining Minority Students in Higher Education: A Framework for Success. Educational Policy Institute.**

**Available in PDF form:**

[http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content\\_storage\\_01/0000000b/80/24/68/21.pdf](http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/24/68/21.pdf)

Summary:

This report is designed to inform and instruct universities who want to keep minority students on a track towards graduation. Some of the recommended retention tactics directly correlate to service-learning. Several successful university retention programs are highlighted, and many provide evidence of success. Also interesting is the extensive annotated bibliography at the end of the study.

Quotes:

“Design curricula with interdisciplinary and real-world emphasis to stimulate interest and profound understanding on behalf of students.” (104)

“Colleges should attempt to use various methods of delivering content to students, focusing on comprehension rather than rote memorization. The use of hands-on, exploratory, and peer learning groups are a few methods of motivating students to learn. A good balance is the use of a variety of instructional methods rather than one dominant method.” (106)

**Vogelgesang, Lori, Ikeda, Elaine K., Gilmartin, Shannon K., Keup, Jennifer R. (2002). Service-Learning and the First-Year Experience: Outcomes Related to Learning and Persistence. In E. Zlotkowski, (Ed.), *Service-Learning and the First-Year Experience: Preparing Students for Personal Success and Civic Responsibility* (Monograph No. 34) (pp.15-26). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.**

Summary:

This chapter reviews the way service-learning intersects with research on the first year of college, and examines how service and service-learning can lead, indirectly or otherwise, to retention.

Quotes:

“Service participation...during the first college year is significantly and positively related to retention...volunteerism and service-learning appear to enhance involvement and facilitate integration (both social and academic) during the first year of college, and these, research shows...are critical to student retention.” (20.)

**Woodard, Dudley B., Mallory, Sherry L., DeLuca, Anne M. (2001). Retention and Institutional Effort: A Self-Study Framework. *NASPA Journal*, 39(1) 53-83.**

Summary:

This article offers a retention assessment framework that helps practitioners assess the strength of their institutional retention efforts and addresses why some institutions graduate students at higher rates than predicted given the entry characteristics of their students. The researchers posit that there are four “spheres of influence” that interact to affect an institution’s ability to retain and graduate its students: the characteristics of enrolled students, the characteristics of the institution, academic good practices used by the institution, and student services good practices used by the institution. Many of the recommended “good practices” correlate with service-learning theory:

Quotes:

“Several academic good practices have been identified as playing a role in an institution’s ability to retain and graduate its students, including: ...providing students with opportunities to practice learned skills, encouraging students to engage in out-of-class interactions with faculty, and providing students with the opportunity to work collaboratively with other students.” (60)

“Several student services good practices have been identified as playing a role in an institution’s ability to retain and graduate its students, including: engaging students in active learning...” (60)

Active learning is defined as having the following service-learning-like characteristics:

“Students are encouraged to bring their personal experiences into the classroom, consider others’ perspectives, and apply new ways of thinking to their own lives. Good student affairs practice provides multiple opportunities for students to engage in various learning experiences.” (p.68)

## **B. Studies Evaluating the Impact of a Service-Learning Course on Retention**

**Axsom, Trish and Piland, William E. (1999) Effects of Service Learning on Student Retention and Success. *NSEE Quarterly*, 24, 15-19.**

Summary:

Researchers at Southwestern College (SWC) compared 71 students who participated in service-learning English Composition course with 49 other students enrolled in a non-service-learning composition course. Those in the service-learning group were significantly more likely to complete the course and report greater agreement with statements about learning as it related to career and civic awareness. Although academic student success rates were not significantly different for service-learning students, the retention rates—especially for women in the service-learning course—are worth noting. The author of the article posits that this may be related to the “connected knowing” theories of feminist scholars like Belenky.

Also interesting is the ethnic and economic diversity of the school:

- In fall 1997 approximately 79% of the enrolled population came from ethnic minority groups
- Almost 25% of SWC’s full time equivalent Hispanic students are first generation college students
- English is not the native language of 77% of SWC’s Hispanic students

Quotes:

“The retention percentage for service-learning classes was 78% for males and 83.6% for females. In the non service-learning classes the percentages were 65.3% for males and 63.5% for females. These findings reflected a statistically significant difference for females.” (17)

A SWC service-learning student writes: “Thanks to service learning, I know who I really am...I used to feel useless. I even felt as I wasn’t making a difference by attending college, but since my first day as a service learning student, I knew that I could really make a difference for my community and especially, my family.” (15)

**Hubbert, Kimberly, *Service Learning and Learning Communities*, Cerritos College (unpublished)**

Summary:

This paper describes service-learning in paired courses at Cerritos College in California. Because of the minimal description of the class structure and lack of qualitative or quantitative data, this study is not recommended for reference use. It is worth noting here, however, that the author states that a very low attrition rate in her class may be linked to the service-learning nature of the curriculum.

Quotes:

“In addition to each group completing their task, the class experiences a very low attrition rate, with only two students, out of about thirty, dropping after the first two weeks. Although there are several factors that can contribute to a low class attrition rate, it can be argued that one of the reasons for such low attrition was the cohesion that developed among group members as well as the connection that students felt to their local community as a result of the assignment.” (10)

**Lima, M. (2000) Service-Learning: A Unique Perspective on Engineering Education. In E. Tsang (Ed.), *Projects That Matter: Concepts and Models for Service Learning in Engineering*, (pp. 109-117). Washington D.C.: American Association for Higher Education.**

Summary:

This chapter describes how service-learning methods were integrated into a first-year biological engineering class at Louisiana State University, and discusses the impact service-learning had on the students' education experiences. Students used their biological engineering skills to design playground structures for a local elementary school. After taking the course, 93 percent of woman and minorities remained in the discipline--a strikingly higher number than the national average retention rate of 70 percent.

Like the Axsom and Piland article, this chapter could be used to support theories that service-learning classes work to engage “connected knowers” by putting engineering in a more humane, real-life context.

Quotes:

“Emphasizing the social component of engineering could enhance the attractiveness of the engineering discipline, particularly for women and minorities. Indeed, the retention rate for women and minorities in the three years that SL projects have been implemented in this course has been substantially higher than the national average.” (114-115)

“If students are able to experience a tangible purpose and framework for fundamental courses they take during the first two years of their curriculum, they are more likely to be motivated and understand why they are learning the required material.” (112)

**Piket-May, Linda and Avery, James (2001). *Service Learning First Year Design Retention Results*, ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference. October 10-13, 2001, Reno, NV.**

Summary:

For six years, researchers tracked participants in a service-learning-oriented first-year engineering course at the College of Engineering and Applied Science at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Although an entirely clear link between service-learning and retention cannot be conclusively drawn, students who took the course (GEEN 1400) graduated from college at higher rates than those who did not.

Quotes:

“...there is a significant increase in the overall graduate retention rate. 6.83% more students graduated having participated in GEEN 1400 when compared to the student base not taking GEEN14000. Even more significant, when observing the retention rates for engineers staying in engineering, participation has increased the retention by 13%. This trend is...very encouraging.” (2)

## **C. Studies Evaluating the Impact of Service or Volunteerism on Retention**

**Astin, Alexander W., Sax, Linda J., Avalos, Juan, (1999) Long –Term Effects of Volunteerism During the Undergraduate Years, *The Review of Higher Education* 22.2.**

Summary:

This longitudinal study tracked students who were first-years in 1985. The students filled out a survey in 1985, and were then surveyed again in 1989 and 1994-1995. The final sample was 12,376. The study found that the short-term effects of volunteer service during undergraduate years persist beyond college, have a positive impact on the student's perception of how well college prepared him or her for work, and increased the likelihood that the student would donate money to his or her alma mater.

There is very little in this article that could be directly applied to the service-learning/retention question.

**Astin, Alexander W., Sax, Linda J., (1998) How Undergraduates Are Affected by Service Participation, *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol 39 (3) 251-263.**

Summary:

Astin and Sax state that participating in service as an undergraduate substantially enhances the student's academic development, life skill development, and sense of civic responsibility. While retention is not explicitly mentioned here, they found correlations between service and factors that have more recently been established as contributing to retention (i.e. faculty interactions.)

Quotes:

“Clearly, undergraduate service participation serves to enhance academic development.” (357)

“Service participants, compared with nonparticipants, were nearly 50% more likely to spend at least an hour a week interacting with faculty...and spent more time with studies and homework than did nonparticipants.” (259)

“The most remarkable finding of this longitudinal study was that all 35 student outcome measures were favorably influenced by service participation. In other

words, participation in volunteer service during the undergraduate years enhanced the student's academic development, civic responsibility, and life skills." (255)

"Participating in service activities during the undergraduate years is also positively associated with...the relevance of undergraduate course work to everyday life." (259)

**Roose, D., Daphne, J., Miller, A.G., Norris, W., Peacock, R., White, C., & White, G. (1997). *Black Student Retention Study: Oberlin College*. Oberlin College.**

Summary:

This quantitative study examined 15 variables to see which ones were associated with retention (i.e. community service, changing majors, summer employment, etc.) This study was based on telephone interviews with African American students from 1987-1999 (final sample = 170 participants.) For African-American students who had attended Oberlin, involvement in community service was the factor most strongly correlated with graduation in the entire study.

Quotes:

"Involvement in community service or volunteering was the factor most strongly correlated with graduation in the entire study... These activities appear to be just as important for promoting student retention as they are for helping the local community." (Oberlin, 8.)

## **D. Additional Low-Income, First-Generation and Minority Student Retention Articles**

**Muraskin, Lana, Lee, John, with Wilner, Abigail and Swail, Watson Scott. *Raising the Graduation Rates of Low-Income College Students* (2004). Washington, D.C.: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.**

Available in PDF form: [http://www.pellinstitute.org/gradrates/Pell\\_Web.pdf](http://www.pellinstitute.org/gradrates/Pell_Web.pdf)

Summary:

This report presents the findings of a study designed by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education to identify the institutional characteristics, practices, and policies that might account for differences in retention and graduation rates among colleges and universities that serve high concentrations of low-income students. Short case studies of ten high-graduation-rate universities are included.

Although it provides a solid background on best practices in college minority retention, no explicit connections can be drawn between these practices and service-learning.

**Thayer, Paul B. (2000) Retention of Students from First Generation and Low Income Backgrounds, *Opportunity Outlook: The Journal of the Council for Opportunity in Education*.**

Summary:

This paper reviews recent literature related to low-income and first-generation student retention in higher education. Offers general retention techniques and case studies of high-graduation-rate universities, but makes no mention of a connection between retention and service-learning.