Advancing Youth Academic Success, School Engagement,
and International Leadership through Service-Learning

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Each year, one-third (33 percent) of all students who enter a public high school drop out. The situation is even worse in inner cities, where one out of every two students (50 percent) who enters a public high school does not graduate. More than half of the nation's high school dropouts have left school by the 10th grade (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morrison 2006; Barton 2005; Pittman 2005).[1]

As for the students who remain in school, the statistics are equally grim. Despite five years of the No Child Left Behind Act and its goal to improve academic achievement in reading and mathematics through increased standardized testing and accountability, the overall academic achievement of students remains less than satisfactory. While student performance on some standardized reading and mathematics measures has improved slightly, students' individual academic *growth* (the difference in scores for a single student from one point in time to another) has decreased since the passage of NCLB (Cronin, Kingsbury, McCall, and Bowe 2005). While it is premature to assess the overall impact of NCLB on students' academic performance, the early results are not promising.

The lack of student academic achievement is particularly evident when comparing the achievement levels of U.S. students with those of students from other countries, especially in the subject areas of mathematics

[1] It should be noted that there is much debate over how to best calculate high school dropout and completion rates. For example, Greene and Winters rely on data from the National Center for Education Statistics for their calculation, which results in an overall high school completion rate of 67% and a completion rate of 50% for both African-Americans and Hispanics. In contrast, the Census Bureau uses data from the Current Population Study and reports the completion rate to be 90% overall, 88% for African-Americans and 76% for Hispanics. For an analysis of the debate regarding high school dropout rate calculations, see L. Mishel and J. Roy (2006). *Rethinking High School Graduation Rates and Trends*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

and science (National Center for Education Statistics 2006). For example, on the mathematics portion of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's 2004 Programme for International Assessment, U.S. students ranked 24th out of the 29 countries that participated in the program. In science, U.S. students scored an average of 24 percent on the physics portion of the most recent Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, compared to the 35 percent overall average score achieved by students from other participating countries. Analyses also reveal continued lower overall academic performance among poorer students when compared to students from more affluent communities, as well as lower academic performance among African-American and Latino students when compared to Caucasian and Asian students (National Center for Education Statistics 2006; Scales and Roehlkepartain 2005).

Among U.S. students who graduate from high school and go on to college, one-third are substantially unprepared for college level academic work (Greene and Forster 2003). In 2005, only 51 percent of American students met the college readiness benchmark on the reading portion of the ACT. For African-American high school graduates, the overall rate of under-preparedness has remained at 80 percent; for Hispanic students, the rate is 84 percent (Greene and Forster 2003).

Leading educational policy analysts conclude that the U.S. is at risk of losing its global competitive edge unless the underachievement and lack of satisfactory performance among a large sector of America's future work force are addressed. In a recently released report on the skills necessary for success in the global economy, the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce (Commission) concludes that

K-12 education needs to restructure its priorities by moving away from traditional paradigms of discipline-specific curricula and toward an educational system that can meet the needs of the more constructivist and interdisciplinary culture of the 21st century.

Specifically, the Commission concludes that K-12 schools need to ensure that students: (1) learn how to make connections across disciplines, (2) know how to use what is learned in school to address real life issues, (3) develop people skills that allow them to work effectively in diverse group settings, (4) build higher order thinking skills that enhance their problem-solving and analytic abilities, (5) increase their intercultural competencies (e.g. ability to converse in different languages and adapt to alternate cultural norms), and (6) are able to effectively organize and utilize sources of information (New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce 2006). Although the

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report recommends that school districts relinquish control to companies and businesses — a recommendation that many educators, including the National School Boards Association, believe would not guarantee a more effective education for our young people — the report also provides a reality check regarding the state of U.S. education and the drastic changes that are needed in our school systems if they are to prepare students for success in a global society.

Beyond Academics

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation, educators have focused on improving the academic achievement of students as measured by their performance on standardized tests. However, as the authors of the Commission report suggest, the teaching of discipline-specific subject matter content is only one part of what should be happening in classrooms. The education system also needs to ensure that

students learn how to use this content knowledge in meaningful ways that extend beyond demonstrating their performance in the classroom.

The Commission identifies important goals that extend the purpose of education beyond a focus on academic achievement alone. Regardless of how schools are ultimately organized, achieving the Commission's educational goals will require substantial shifts in the ways classrooms are organized and instruction is delivered. It will require moving instruction beyond the traditional "chalk and talk" approach to pedagogies that engage students more actively in authentic and complex tasks that build advanced knowledge and transferable skills. It will require schools to provide opportunities for students to immerse themselves in new environments that broaden their horizons and expand their understanding of the world. Overall, it will require schooling to have a greater focus on developing the whole child.

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DEVELOPING THE WHOLE CHILD

The Commission's report suggests that along with a focus on building academic learning and cognitive development, schools need to nurture students' affective development in the social, personal, civic, and career domains. Indeed, student academic achievement is not determined solely by the learning experiences students have in classroom settings; students' educational experiences at home and in the community significantly influence what students know and are able to do academically (Comer 2004). While the "academics first" approach to schooling, which has intensified substantially since the passage of NCLB, has its merits in promoting greater student achievement in key academic areas, it tends to de-emphasize other important aspects of student learning and development (Comer 2004; Noddings 2005).

As Comer (2004), Noddings (2005), and Miller (1997) assert, learning and understanding require not only stimulating the mind, but also nurturing the heart, body, and spirit. Students who are hungry, depressed, angry, or conflicted do not perform at optimal academic levels (Eccles and Gootman 2002). Poor relationships with peers and adults can negatively affect students' motivation to learn, and their overall ability to focus and concentrate on mental tasks (Woodward and Fergusson 2000). In addi-

tion, students with low self-esteem are more likely to develop learned helplessness and be less self-determined as learners (Valas 2001).

Therefore, beyond the engagement of students in academically rigorous classroom experiences, students need to be exposed to educational experiences that nurture their development of character, self-esteem, and sense of empowerment. These personal and social development factors are important because they place students in an emotional and social space from which they can engage more fully in cognitive tasks and academic learning (National Research Council 2003). Studies also show that students who possess these characteristics engage in fewer at-risk behaviors and do better academically than those who do not (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Scales and Leffert 1999).

Students' sense of character, self-esteem and empowerment can be cultivated by promoting positive relationships with peers and adults as well as by providing students with experiences that facilitate their development of leadership skills. These types of experiences increase the likelihood that young people will develop greater self-efficacy, positive social relationships, and greater social and academic engagement (Noddings 2005; Scales and Leffert 1999). A focus on

educating the whole child, therefore, is a key to creating the conditions for students to achieve academically.

IMPLEMENTING A PEDAGOGY OF ENGAGEMENT

Martin and Halperin (2006) report that every nine seconds in America, a student becomes a dropout. Conventional wisdom suggests that students who drop out do so because they are engaged in at-risk behaviors — drug and alcohol abuse, gang violence, underage sexual activity, or other unlawful activities. However, the reasons students drop out of school have less to do with students' personal behaviors and circumstances, and more to do with the nature of schooling itself.

A recent research study conducted by Civic Enterprises reveals that the reasons most frequently cited for dropping out of school are students being bored with classes and finding school irrelevant to their lives. (See Figure 1.)

What dropout statistics reveal is that despite NCLB's increased emphasis on raising K-12 academic achievement, schools are failing to create the conditions that put students in a position to meet these academic goals and standards. According to the National Research Council (2003), rising student disaffection is considered one of the most serious crises in education today. No matter

FIGURE 1

Reasons High School Dropouts Give for Leaving School

47%	Classes were not interesting
43%	Missed too many days/unable to keep up
42%	Spend time with people not interested in school
38%	Too much freedom and not enough rules or structured time
35%	Failing in school
28%	Don't get along with students or teachers
21%	Don't feel safe at school
18%	Get a job/have to help support family
12%	Get married, pregnant, or become a parent
12%	Have drug or alcohol problem

Source: Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006).

FIGURE 2
Instructional Practices for Successful Learning

1.	Emphasizes learning over teaching: instruction is driven and organized by what students need to know rather than what curricular units need to be taught.	6.	Connects new knowledge to what students know by having students construct meaning (knowledge depth): instruction provides a vertical alignment of curriculum that helps students connect new learning to learning from previous years.
2.	Engages students as active participants in the learning process: a teacher's role is that of being the proverbial "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage."	7.	Meaningful and interesting to students: instruction engages students in activities whereby they can see the value of the information to be learned for their lives outside of school.
3.	Centers on students rather than teachers: instruction takes into account students' needs and concerns and is not solely reliant on teachers' preferences or driven by preset, scripted curricula.	8.	Brain-based: instruction engages students in exciting and meaningful experiences that trigger neurons associated with enhanced retention of information.
4.	Promotes the development of students' higher order thinking skills: instructional activities focus less on memorization of discrete facts and more on complex tasks that involve problem solving, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.	9.	Socially constructed: instruction allows students to receive peer-critique and share their personal knowledge, skills, and talents with peers and adults.
5.	Focuses on making connections among disciplines (knowledge breadth): instruction provides for horizontal alignment of curriculum in which students apply knowledge from different disciplines to build understanding of complex phenomena.	10.	Practiced and used: instruction provides multiple opportunities for students to bridge theory with practice and the abstract with the concrete through applications of learning in new contexts and situations.

Sources: Slavkin (2004); Marzano, Pikering, and Pollock (2001); Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (1999); Oakes and Lipton (1999).

how rigorous or well-implemented a curriculum may be, if students do not connect with the subject matter or engage themselves in the learning process, they are unlikely to achieve.

Current school efforts to reform the educational experience by raising expectations, setting standards, and adopting well-researched standardized curricula are certainly admirable. However, such moves are insufficient for securing the academic success of our students. Curricular approaches that focus on a set of highly structured, prescribed activities that promote a one-size-fits-all approach to learning have not proven very appealing to students who have unique interests, specific learning needs, and individual talents. If students, especially those who are most disenfranchised with school, find the curriculum boring and irrelevant to their lives, then it is unlikely they will be motivated to invest themselves fully in the content (National Research Council 2003).

Therefore, instruction needs to engage students actively in the learning process as well as take into account students' interests and needs. This more experiential approach to teaching incorporates instructional practices that have been shown to improve student engagement in learning. (See Figure 2.)

EXPANDING BOUNDARIES

As a report from the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce details, schools must prepare students to be successful in an ever-expanding global society. Students' potential for future success as employees and citizens is dependent on their ability to work effectively in diverse communities and multicultural settings, both at the national and transnational levels (2006). The Commission predicts that the future workforce will require individuals who are multilingual, can navigate effectively across various cultural settings, and understand the complexities and nuances of different societal norms. The increasing globalization of society has implications for the kinds of experiences schools need to provide for students.

While a growing number of K-12 students are immersing themselves in multicultural experiences through cross-cultural web dialogues, study abroad, and other experiences that broaden their horizons, too many young people, especially those with limited opportunities, maintain a narrow view of the world (Noddings 2005). They see the world primarily through the lens of the neighborhoods in which they live, the social networks they have formed, and the norms and practices to which they are accustomed.

Students of the 21st century need to develop multicultural knowledge and intercultural competencies if they wish to be successful as workers, citizens, and leaders in a global society. Therefore, schools need to provide educational opportunities that expand students' horizons beyond their familiar notions of the world. Immersing students in communities different from their own provides opportunities for them to learn about other cultural norms and practices. From intercultural experiences, students can build a better understanding of diverse populations and perspectives, reassess their preconceived notions about unfamiliar groups and practices, and develop intercultural fluency (Banks 2006; Boyle-Baise 2002).

Meeting the Challenge Through Service-Learning

Of the various ways schools can meet the educational challenges of the 21st century, service-learning shows much promise as an instructional strategy for educating the whole child. Service-learning is built on academically rich "authentic" experiences that occur in students' own community and have relevance to students' lives (Slavkin 2004). The practice of service-learning involves having students use their academic knowledge to construct solutions to complex

problems in their community. Students take action on those solutions and analyze the results. As a pedagogy of engagement that extends academic learning beyond the classroom walls, service-learning provides opportunities for students to expand their view of the world. Studies have revealed that high quality service-learning experiences can enhance students' academic, personal, social, civic, career, and ethical development (Billig 2000). In many ways, service-learning engages the whole child and creates the kinds of learning environments and conditions that facilitate and support students' academic achievement and overall school success.

ACADEMIC OUTCOMES OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Since the passage of NCLB, there has been a call for more research that shows the impacts of service-learning on students' academic achievement. Critics of service-learning have questioned its educational value, suggesting that because service-learning requires extensive time and work to develop and implement, it detracts from a focus on academics and overall school curriculum (Kapustka 2002). However, several studies of service-learning in K-12 education have revealed a number of positive academic outcomes for students. Specifically, service-learning has been found to increase scores

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on standardized tests, foster content knowledge and skills, improve attendance, and improve grade point averages (Billig, Meyer, and Hofschire 2003; Klute and Billig 2002; Ammon, Furco, Chi, and Middaugh 2001; Santmire, Giraud, and Grosskopf 1999).

While the academic outcome findings are encouraging, it should be noted that the achievement findings are mixed and the overall effect sizes of the results are generally small. Currently, several investigations are underway to assess which programmatic features of service-learning are most likely to produce academic and civic gains. So while service-learning proponents seek to make the case that service-learning has positive effects on academic achievement, the typical measures of academic success (e.g., test scores, attendance) show mixed results. With the accountability pressures of NCLB in full swing, the longstanding call for more and better research to investigate the academic outcomes of service-learning continues (Billig 2000).

THE MEDIATING EFFECTS OF SERVICE-LEARNING

In contrast to the academic outcome studies, the research on service-learning in other domain areas (civic, personal, social, and career) reveals generally more robust and consistently positive findings. While some think this weakens the case for the academic merits of service-learning, in actuality, these findings make a strong case for the educational value of service-learning, especially as they pertain to preparing students for success in a global society.

For example, recent studies have found that K-12 students engaged in service-learning gain enhanced citizenship and social responsibility, and enhance their awareness and understanding of social issues (Metz and Youniss 2005; Kahne and Westheimer 2003; Covitt 2002; Furco 2002; Melchior and Bailis 2002; Michelsen, Zaff, and Hair 2002; Perry and Katula 2001; Torney-Purta 2001; Zaff and Michelsen 2001; McDevitt and Chaffee 2000; Scales, Blyth, Berkas, and Kielsmeier 2000).

Studies have also found that service-learning can broaden career awareness and options, enhance understanding of workforce ethics, and enhance workforce preparation (Furco 2002; Shumer 2001; Melchior 1999). In addition, students who engage in service-learning gain greater exposure to a variety of perspectives, show positive changes in ethical judgment, and enhance their ability to make independent decisions regarding moral issues (Leming 2001; Melchior 1999). As the Commission report describes, these are the kinds of civic and vocational skills students need to build global leadership for productive employment.

Similarly, service-learning studies reveal fairly consistent positive effects on key personal development areas, such as self-esteem, empowerment, self-efficacy, and engagement in prosocial behaviors (Kraft and Wheeler 2003; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Furco 2002; Hecht 2002; Laird and Black 2002). Students who possess these personal assets are more likely to become secure individuals who take initiative and who aspire to achieve higher goals (Scales and Leffert 1999). These students, in turn, are more likely to perform better in school and achieve academically (Eccles and Gootman 2002).

Other studies have found that service-learning and other organized civic participation activities have robust, positive effects on students' motivation for learning and student engagement in three areas: academic engagement, civic engagement, and social engagement. Specifically, several studies have found that when done well, service-learning and community involvement programs can enhance students' engagement in school and in learning (Ritchie and Walters 2003; Billig 2002; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Melchior and Bailis 2002; Scales et al. 2000; Follman and Muldoon 1997). Studies also show that well-designed service-learning experiences can enhance students' engagement in community and civic affairs, specifically as it relates to their involvement in the social and civic issues most important to their own lives (Billig, Root, and Jesse 2005; Kahne, Chi, and Middaugh 2002; Melchior and Bailis 2002; Michelsen, Zaff, and Hair 2002; Melchior 1999; Berkas 1997). Studies have also shown that service-learning and active community participation can enhance students' engagement with peers and adults, building more positive interactions with adults and producing more positive role models for disenfranchised students (Martin, Neal, Kielsmeier and Crossley 2006; Holliday and Luginbuhl

2004; Furco 2002; Billig 2002; Henness 2001). Given the large number of students who are bored with and disengaged from school, the true value of service-learning may be in its ability to strengthen students' connection to school and learning.

Overall, it appears that while service-learning does not always have a strong, direct effect on students' academic achievement, it has strong potential for fostering student development in areas that mediate academic achievement and success in school. By increasing students' motivation to learn and engagement in school, building more confident and empowered individuals, and fostering more prosocial behaviors, service-learning can help place students — especially those who are most disaffected and disenfranchised with school — in a better position to achieve academically.

Preparing for the Future

While more studies are needed, it appears that when done well, service-learning is a powerful strategy for preparing students for academic success, school engagement, and global leadership. By focusing on the whole child, incorporating a pedagogy of engagement, and providing opportunities for

students to expand their horizons, service-learning offers a way to help students become more engaged in learning and to see the relevance of what they are learning to their lives outside of school.

High quality service-learning experiences typically present students with challenging tasks that require them to analyze a complex situation in their community, identify successful strategies for addressing the issue, implement one or more of the identified strategies, reflect on their experience, and evaluate the success of their actions. To perform quality service, students must be able to apply their skills and knowledge in appropriate ways to meet the needs of the community. They must learn how to negotiate with various constituents, listen to and understand different perspectives, challenge their own assumptions and reconsider their pre-conceived notions. Service-learners must engage in deliberation to explore possible actions, analyze potential and real consequences of their actions, and understand protocols and policies. These are the kinds of competencies that are called for in the Commission report.

A rigorous curriculum of discipline-based foundational knowledge is essential for students to progress to more advanced studies. However, as the Commission report suggests, this curriculum needs to be taught in ways that instill in young people the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are necessary for their roles as citizens in a global society. Building a curriculum that incorporates active and authentic learning experiences designed to make the academic content more relevant, interesting, and meaningful for students is one way to help schools create the conditions necessary for building stronger student engagement in learning and for meeting the needs of the whole child. Through its focus on connecting academic work to the real lives of students and through its use of experiential and constructivist teaching approaches, service-learning offers a way to meet the educational goals that an increasingly multicultural, global society demands of our future citizens and employees.

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