NATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING CONFERENCE®
LEARNING FROM THE FIELD

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Executive Summary

Service-learning participants, practitioners, and policymakers advocate for the use of service-learning as a pedagogy that promotes equitable and inclusive practices in schools and communities, creates leadership opportunities for youth (especially those who are typically excluded), supports the mental health needs of students and educators, enhances the voices and power of young people, and helps students forge meaningful pathways for the future.

In April 2022 National Service-Learning Conference participants shared their perspectives on current needs and opportunities in the service-learning field. Many needs connected to the most pressing issues of the day: the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing mental health crisis and its impacts on youth and educators, racial injustice, systemic oppression, political polarization in the United States and its impacts on education, climate change, and global conflicts (specifically the invasion of Ukraine by Russia).
Participants also expressed needs for young people being prepared to access and maintain sustainable employment, overworked educators being supported professionally and emotionally, and positive youth-adult partnerships empowering young people as agents of positive change in their communities.

As an established national leader in service-learning, the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) will make this learning from the field actionable by:

- Identifying and implementing ways to positively impact the mental health of youth and educators;
- Supporting progress towards equitable education systems through the integration of service-learning with school- and community-based efforts;
- Listening to the field and receiving guidance from service-learning practitioners (especially youth leading these efforts); and
- Creating resources to use during service-learning experiences that highlight job-relevant skills development and ways to explore career and continued education opportunities.

Through collective learning and action, the field can strengthen the academic, civic, and character outcomes of all young people through service-learning.
INTRODUCTION

What is the state of service-learning today? How can this pedagogy empower youth, foster learning and creativity, and support youth-adult partnerships working to solve problems and create societal change?

In April 2022 participants of the National Service-Learning Conference® (SLC) were invited to share their perspectives while examining prominent issues in society and education through a service-learning lens. Participants included elementary, middle, high school, and university students, educators, policymakers, and youth development and nonprofit professionals. These diverse groups shared their thoughts in facilitated “wisdom circles,” sessions in which small groups collaborated to answer:
How can service-learning address the current mental health needs of both students and educators?

2. How can service-learning be used to build equitable and inclusive social systems?

3. How can service-learning be used to meet the needs of education systems and educators?

4. How can service-learning support the current needs of students while preparing them for adulthood?

The following captures the ideas and perspectives shared over the course of four “wisdom circle” sessions. Issues that shaped these discussions included two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread protests of systemic racism, the 2020 US presidential election, the insurrection of January 6th, 2021, and the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia.
Mental Health

Guiding Question: How can service-learning address the current mental health needs of both students and educators?

SLC participants identified a surge in students’ mental health struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic: higher rates of depression and anxiety posed unforeseen challenges in online learning and the return to in-person learning. Educators and students emphasized that throughout the pandemic youth have experienced many factors contributing to mental health struggles including isolation from family and friends, years of limited socialization, increased fatigue and stress, decreased motivation, and increased negative self-talk. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than one third of high school students have experienced mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and even more have experienced consistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (CDC, 2022). In the face of these challenges, SLC participants believe students’ mental health should be prioritized with greater emphasis on mental health support in classrooms. Topics such as healthy coping mechanisms, the complexities of mental illnesses, substance abuse, stress management, and coping with emotional triggers and potentially traumatic events should be addressed in schools. Participants believe educators should be supported and trained to meet students’ mental health needs, have resources available for students, and be ready to normalize sharing experiences in classrooms.

To address current and anticipated mental health needs, SLC participants advocated for service-learning implementation in schools to improve the mental health of students, educators, and community members. Educators and students believe student-led discussions and service-learning processes can be used to target mental health needs and break down stigmas in schools and communities. Service-learning projects can directly address communities’ mental health needs while also supporting youth by empowering students to take action, fostering positive school environments, and providing students with opportunities to make personal and community connections (Wilczenski & Cook, 2009). Additionally, service-learning opportunities provide youth with outlets to confront anger, fear, and uncertainty about issues that are important to them, helping them develop greater self-awareness, confidence, and leadership skills (Toppa, 2021). These outlets are especially important as youth and educators navigate challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and other current events.
In addition to experiencing pandemic-related mental health struggles, many young people develop anxiety and depression related to academics. Students who are not effectively supported when facing academic obstacles can develop a “sense of powerlessness, learned helplessness, and lack of control,” all of which contribute to mental health challenges (Kraft & Wheeler, 2003). These issues can lead to lower engagement in learning and school activities, chronic absences, and behavioral challenges (Kraft & Wheeler, 2003). Service-learning can lead to higher academic outcomes and increased motivation in school (Kraft & Wheeler, 2003) by helping students develop a sense of purpose and feeling more in-control of their situations.

This motivation is especially important now: SLC participants overwhelmingly agreed that the COVID–19 pandemic has negatively affected their ability to teach and learn. Two years into the pandemic, educators and students believe it is important for schools to re-evaluate priorities and place greater emphasis on well-being, empathetic relationships, and self-exploration. Service-learning can be utilized to honor these priorities, by creating opportunities for students to improve their mental health and have greater success in school and beyond.

Exemplifying the ways in which service-learning can address mental health needs, students from Heritage Hall High School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma developed a service-learning project called “Munch Bunch” to create a more inclusive school environment. Students from Heritage Hall High School spoke about their experiences on “The Power of Young People to Change the World,” a podcast presented by NYLC which provides service-learning practitioners (especially youth) with a platform to share experiences and empower others to create meaningful change. Students identified the need for a more inclusive school environment, brainstormed potential solutions to address this issue, and crafted a service-learning project in which students share meals and build community by having guided conversations about mental health (Meuers, 2022). Not only did this service-learning project improve the overall school environment through mindful conversations about mental health, it also empowered and engaged the students involved in the project’s development.
INCLUSIVITY & EQUITY

Guiding Question: How can service-learning be used to build equitable and social systems?

SLC participants identified service-learning as a method for improving inclusivity and equity in schools and communities by providing leadership opportunities to youth that are historically excluded, creating safe spaces for students struggling with mental health, providing opportunities for youth to be heard in schools and communities, and helping young people forge meaningful pathways for their futures.

A key component of service-learning is culturally-relevant pedagogy which defines student success in diverse ways, helps students appreciate their own and other cultures, and equips students with tools to address real-world problems and inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). According to SLC participants, these approaches create opportunities for students to interact with various cultures within their communities, sparks important conversations that would not otherwise occur during instruction, encourages students to work with people who hold diverse perspectives, and enables students (and educators) to see that there are multiple methods of learning and pathways to success.

SLC participants advocate for service-learning as an inclusive pedagogy, contending “service-learning is for everyone; it’s for people of different backgrounds, whether they are privileged or high-risk” (SLC participant, 2022). Participants shared that while all students can benefit from service-learning, those who benefit most include students from historically oppressed and underserved communities, youth who are passionate about addressing issues in their communities, students who are historically excluded from academic and school leadership opportunities, and learners whose needs are not met by one-size-fits-all pedagogies. The notion of implementing service-learning to benefit more students aligns with Zaretta Hammond’s concepts of “culturally-responsive teaching” in which educators respond to students by using “cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing” (Hammond, 2015). This cultural approach promotes inclusivity and equity, as it aims to help all students build self-efficacy and positive mindsets about themselves and their potential for learning.
Exemplifying the potential for service-learning to encourage culturally-relevant teaching and learning, students in civic service-learning courses at Foundation Academy Collegiate in Trenton, New Jersey organized Mental Illness Needs to be Destigmatized (MIND) to address the urgent lack of conversations around mental health in their community. Students researched mental health issues, identified and collaborated with national mental health organizations, and hosted two virtual resource fairs to raise awareness and encourage people to discuss mental health needs (Foundations Academies, 2021).

Educator Colleen DiDonato described her culturally-responsive teaching and youth empowerment approach: “when you are working with students in service-learning or really in any content area, allow them to choose a topic or something that they’re passionate about and they will run with it” (Meuers, A., 2021, 36:00). DiDonato’s pedagogy supports students to build agency and professional confidence while demonstrating mindsets educators need to empower youth: “The kids are brilliant, and that is something I think every educator needs to realize… I guide them towards a group that is interested in the same things, but allow them to choose the group roles so they can realize their strengths [and] develop them themselves… lots of choice, lots of guiding, lots of questions. But allow them to run and don’t hold them back” (Meuers, A., 2021, 36:00). The award-winning work of MIND demonstrates how educators can empower students to create inclusive and equitable communities.
EDUCATORS & SYSTEMS

Guiding Question: How can service-learning be used to meet the needs of education systems and educators?

SLC participants emphasized the ways in which service-learning fosters positive youth-adult partnerships and student-teacher relationships that impact students’ learning experiences. Participants believe when teachers show they care, students feel more invested in what they are learning.

According to the Brookings Institute, teachers’ expectations of students impact students’ academic outcomes, especially “students from disadvantaged backgrounds who have been hit hardest by COVID-19 and who need the most help” (Gupta & Sampat, 2021, para. 2). As teachers’ biases affect their expectations of students, students perceived negatively are positioned at a disadvantage in which their potential for growth is inhibited by teachers’ actions. A cycle exists between teachers and students in which “teacher beliefs about students’ growth potential shape teachers’ actions, which then, in turn impacts students’ growth” (Gupta & Sampat, 2021, para. 9). Gupta and Sampat (2021) contend that effective pedagogical practices can be used to create a positive feedback loop in which a larger proportion of students are engaged and enabled to reach their full potential.

SLC participants encourage the use of service-learning as an effective pedagogical practice that can be implemented in schools to empower students of all backgrounds and make educational experiences more equitable.

Many educators shared that service-learning motivates teachers by providing opportunities for autonomy and professional judgment, in addition to being supported by family and community members partnering in service-learning efforts. One SLC participant who has successfully implemented district-wide service-learning for years noted the importance of educators achieving buy-in from education system decision-makers by demonstrating how specific academic goals and standards are met for all students through the pedagogy of service-learning.
The NYLC podcast “The Power of Youth to Change the World,” shares the story of Harry Hurst Middle School’s robust service-learning program. One teacher articulated the ways in which service-learning benefits both students and teachers: “When you hear the kids talk about their experiences, it validates everything you are trying to do and all the hard work you do outside of school; it makes you want to try even harder to give them more experiences” (Meuers, 2021). This demonstrates how service-learning fuels a cycle of positive attitudes towards learning that motivates students and educators.
GUIDING QUESTION: How can service-learning support the current needs of students while preparing them for adulthood?

YOUTH PREPARATION FOR ADULTHOOD

SLC participants expressed that service-learning can be used to meet the long-term needs of young people by creating opportunities to develop important skills for the future and gain actionable knowledge about society. Participants asserted that service-learning helps students define their passions and priorities, understand how to participate in societal systems, build agency and critical thinking skills, and practice workplace skills like problem-solving, public speaking, research, and collaboration. SLC participants shared that as service-learning bridges classroom learning with skills development, learning becomes more relevant and meaningful which in turn increases students’ academic motivations. SLC participants believe that while it is important for school systems to focus on academic content, career and job skills should also be emphasized in service-learning so students can apply their learning to future situations. When asked about the role of service-learning in preparing students for adulthood, SLC participants produced a list of skills and traits that students gain from service-learning experiences (Figure 1).
The views of SLC participants are supported by Mitchell and Rost–Banik (2019): “sustained service-learning experiences” facilitate the development of skills such as self-awareness, understanding of civic responsibility, teamwork, communication, and community organizing, all of which contribute to one’s personal and professional development. These skills help young people prepare for their futures, but they are also important for helping students succeed academically, build healthy relationships, develop mentally and emotionally, and learn to overcome challenges.
In addition to helping students build skills, SLC participants shared that service-learning provides students with opportunities to explore career options and develop professional interests. Students from Harry Hurst Middle School in Destrehan, Louisiana attest to the ways service-learning has helped them explore future possibilities. Year after year, these students participate in the school’s “Wetland Watchers” service-learning program in which the Louisiana wetlands are used as a learning space to involve students in environmental science and conservation efforts. On “The Power of Young People to Change the World” an eighth grade student from the Wetland Watchers articulated how she wishes to create a similar program in the future: “[My teacher] has just impacted my life so much that it just makes me want to do something like this one day and help the kids later on in life” (Meuers, 2021). This student demonstrates how service-learning can be a meaningful way to expose students to future pathways and provide opportunities to explore potential professions at a young age.
SYNTHESIS

SLC participants identified an array of issues including mental health needs, inclusivity and equity for all students (especially those from historically oppressed groups), the impacts of teachers’ biases, political challenges in education at the state and national levels, and the need for relevancy of classroom learning. Many SLC participants shared a belief that service-learning should be implemented in schools to cultivate positive youth and adult development while creating equitable education experiences for students.

As the world faces a surge in mental health challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, service-learning can be used to break down mental health stigmas, empower youth, and encourage schools to adapt priorities to meet students’ and educators’ needs. Service-learning can be used to promote inclusivity and equity in education by focusing on culturally-relevant pedagogies and defining “learning” and “success” in diverse ways. Service-learning can engage practitioners in challenging biases, a key step to fostering relationships and environments in which students are able to reach their full potential. Service-learning also bridges traditional classroom learning with skills-based learning, supporting students to build relevant skills for the future and explore career possibilities. Students, educators, and other service-learning practitioners represented at the 2022 National Service-Learning Conference believe service-learning is a powerful and effective tool to empower students and solve prominent problems in education and society.
NEXT STEPS & RECOMMENDATIONS

*Guided by learning from the field during the 2022 National Service-Learning Conference and other convening, NYLC will continue to support service-learning practitioners by taking the following actions.*

**Mental Health**

NYLC commits to identify and implement ways to positively impact the mental health of youth and educators by providing resources for young people to lead service-learning efforts that support mental health and positive youth development, continuing work such as the NYLC Youth Advisory Council Mental Health Clubs Handbook (NYLC Youth Advisory Council, 2022) and the NYLC Service-Learning/Social-Emotional Learning Crosswalk (NYLC, 2022). NYLC will continue working to support social-emotional learning efforts and will work with researchers and mental health professionals to provide awareness of how youth brain development is impacted by service-learning experiences.
Supporting Equitable and Inclusive Systems:

An important aspect of any pedagogy or education initiative is assessing students’ progress as well as ensuring educators and systems are accountable for students’ outcomes. NYLC will continue to support schools to develop methods of monitoring the impacts of service-learning on students’ academic and personal development. NYLC will also work with leaders of education systems to integrate service-learning into accountability systems in ways that support the needs of students and educators.

In addition to NYLC’s current work advocating for national civic education and service-learning funding, NYLC will organize a national collective of youth and adult service-learning leaders that support each other through coaching, sharing resources, and standing together to advocate for their needs.

NYLC will contribute to national efforts to unite communities and combat political polarization by piloting efforts that use service-learning to catalyze collaboration between historically divided, segregated, and/or politically opposed communities. This work will explore how service-learning and civic engagement might be used to heal communities (and a nation) suffering from political and ideological divisions. This is an approach highlighted by Avril Haines, a commissioner on the the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service: “the reality is service can actually bring us together in ways that nothing else seems to be able to...through these experiences, we see the value of service to actually heal these divisions” (Allen, J. R., Haines, A., Heck, J. J., Hill, F., Sawhill, I., 2020, p. 30).

NYLC will co-create this work with communities and community organizers, strategically selecting partners who are open and ready to work with others who have differing beliefs and ideologies.
Learning from the Service-Learning Field

NYLC will continue to use the National Service-Learning Conference and other convening to hear from the field and receive guidance from service-learning practitioners (especially youth leading these efforts). The “Wisdom Circles” work started at the 2022 National Service-Learning Conference will continue annually, providing multiyear longitudinal data illuminating consistencies and/or shifts in the field’s needs.

NYLC organizational decision-making is continuously guided by youth members of the NYLC Board of Directors as well as the NYLC Youth Advisory Council, a cohort of young people leading service-learning efforts in collaboration with NYLC staff. To actively hear from – and be guided by – service-learning leaders representing the diversity of the field, NYLC will establish a Practitioner Advisory Council. This group of service-learning educators, K-12 and higher education administrators, youth-serving mental health professionals and career counselors, social-emotional learning and culturally responsive teaching specialists, and others will guide NYLC decision-making by providing valuable and diverse “on the ground” perspectives.

Supporting Youth Preparing for their Futures

To continue supporting youth development of job skills and career exploration, NYLC will create resources for educators and career counselors to use during service-learning experiences to intentionally highlight job-relevant skills development and ways to explore career and continued education opportunities.
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