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## Academic Service Learning Benefits Diverse, Urban Community College Students

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# Academic Service Learning Benefits Diverse, Urban Community College Students

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## **Abstract**

Urban community college students are a vulnerable population, often carrying one or more risk factors that predict they will not graduate or transfer to a four-year institution. This article presents evidence that academic service learning can provide support for urban community college students, increasing retention and providing multiple positive benefits. After participating in service learning, urban community college students report increased confidence in their ability to learn and apply course content knowledge, general education knowledge, and workplace skills as well as an interest in civic engagement.

## **Introduction**

City University of New York (CUNY) community colleges serve a diverse group of urban students that share certain similarities in that most carry risk factors that impede success towards completion of the associates degree (Burns, 2010).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the four year graduation rate for all community colleges is 40 percent, while at urban community colleges the graduation rate is closer to 20 percent (IPEDS, 2014). This may be due in part to identified risk factors found in abundance at many urban community colleges, including low income, minority status, immigrant status, and remediation needs. It is this blend of students that populate Queensborough Community College

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(QCC) of the City University of New York (QCC Fact Book, 2014). The importance of retaining these students at college is significant since lower levels of education translates into lower earning potential (USNCES, 2012) and may lead to a negative cycle for future generations.

When searching for methodologies to combat these risk factors, Academic Service Learning (ASL) stands out as a powerful pedagogical tool. This is a pedagogy that allows students to apply academic knowledge and learn course content in “real-life settings,” while reflecting on their experience as they meet a genuine community need. Studies have shown that ASL has a positive impact on the learning of academic and general education objectives such as critical thinking and personal and interpersonal development while increasing civic responsibility (Eyler & Giles 1999; Astin et al. 2000). Further, ASL has been identified as a High Impact Practice (HIP) that increases rates of student retention and engagement, and may particularly have its greatest impact on the traditionally underserved (Kuh, 2008; Finley and McNair, 2013). ASL can also be readily incorporated into a number of different courses resulting in students having multiple exposures to this HIP which greatly increases positive student outcomes (Kuh, 2008; Finley and McNair, 2013).

Most research on the positive benefits of ASL and on HIPs has been conducted in baccalaureate institutions. The results suggest that community college students are a population that would greatly benefit from this pedagogy, yet there are only a handful of empirical research studies focusing on these students (Taggart and Crisp, 2011). Prentice and Robinson (2007; 2010), using the results of national surveys conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges, conclude that community college students participating in ASL also demonstrate positive gains in academics, general education objectives and civic engagement. In addition, ASL has been shown to have a positive impact on career and technical education students (CTE), a sub-set of community college students, increasing the retention of these students and positively impacting student academics and career skills (Ellerton et al., 2014). There is a need for further research on the impact of ASL on community college students in general, and in diverse, urban settings in particular, since these students carry many risk factors and may benefit the most from this pedagogy.

This paper presents positive evidence that ASL increases these community college students' confidence in their academic and general education skills, increases retention, and imbues these students with a greater interest in society and civic engagement. Differences among student populations will be compared, including the impact by gender, race/ethnicity, and course of study. Based on these results we contend that ASL provides many important advantages to diverse groups of students in an urban community college setting.

### **Institutional and Instructional Context**

QCC is part of the City University of New York system and is located in Queens, New York, one of the most diverse areas within the United States (CUNY, 2014). Students come from 143 countries and over 40 percent speak a language other than English at home. Thirty percent of all students are Hispanic, 25 percent are Asian, 25 percent are black, and 19 percent are white (QCC Fact Book, 2014). Forty-five percent of QCC students are first-generation college attendees (CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, 2014). Sixty-four percent of students receive financial aid and many require remediation (QCC Fact Book, 2014). In order to address the risk factors of first time, full-time students entering the college, QCC instituted a student support system delivered through an academy model that groups students according to a field of study. Along with this intense delivery of support came the inclusion of HIPs into course curriculum.

The Office of Academic Service-learning (OASL) at QCC supervises ASL on campus, coordinating multiple aspects of the process, including faculty support and professional development. ASL at QCC takes on many forms with faculty deciding how best to incorporate it into the framework of their courses. In some classrooms at QCC, ASL is a course requirement for all students while in other classrooms it is optional, often offered as a replacement for an existing assignment, or as an extra credit assignment. All students in a class may work on one project or students may work individually or in small groups on multiple projects. QCC faculty collaborate with many different community partners, both on and off campus. Projects have focused on a range of issues, including the environment, mental health, health and nutrition, adult literacy, senior services, advocacy, homelessness, hunger, K-14 education, and the formerly incarcerated. Since courses are not identified as service learning at the time of registration, students do not self-select to participate in ASL.

The basic requirement for all ASL courses is that they follow the “3R’s” being *Real*, *Reciprocal* and *Reflective* (Godfrey et al, 2005). This refers to: *Real*--fulfill a genuine community need; *Reciprocal*--provide benefits to both the students and the community partner; and *Reflective*--directly connect the service performed to the course learning objectives.

### **Data Sources**

During the fall 2013 and spring 2014 semesters, a quantitative survey was administered to ASL students by the Office of Academic Service-Learning. Approximately 750 students from more than 60 classes over both semesters participated in this analysis. Fifteen different disciplines were represented in these various courses including academic literacy, art, biology, business, education, engineering technology, English, health, massage therapy, math, nursing, physics, psychology, sociology, and speech communication and theatre arts.

### **Surveys**

Students completed surveys at one point in time, after completing the service learning project. The purpose of using a post-only design was to achieve a deeper understanding of how students reported the impact of service learning on civic engagement and their academic and workplace knowledge, skills, and interests. Students were asked to self-report if they gained increased confidence in a variety of specific abilities as a result of their participation in service learning.

The same survey was administered both semesters and consisted of 23 questions related to academic course content, general education learning, career skills and volunteering/society. “General education learning” refers to the general objectives most colleges have for their students and here are categorized as competency in reading, writing, speaking, analyzing and problem solving. Colleges also expect students to engage in teamwork, complete projects on time, respect and communicate with diverse groups. These important workplace skills are presented as a separate category.

Twenty-two questions were graded responses on a five-point Likert-scale, and one was an open-ended question. Although the Likert-scale questions remained

the same over the two semesters, the open-ended question was changed. Eight of the survey questions used an agree/disagree scale, thirteen question used a confidence scale (i.e., not at all confident, very confident, etc.), and one question used a quality scale (i.e., poor, good, excellent, etc.). Demographic information was also collected at that time. All survey data were collected anonymously and only identified by course. Analysis was done by OASL staff. The student survey was approved by CUNY's Community College Institutional Review Board.

### **Student Reflections**

The open-ended question included on the survey allowed students to reflect on their service learning experiences. In fall 2013, students were asked to describe a specific project experience and in spring 2014 students were asked to describe how they used material learned in the course to do their project. Students' perceptions were also obtained from reflection assignments.

### **Student Retention**

Retention data comparing service learning students to non-service learners were collected and analyzed by QCC's Office of Institutional Research. Data currently available are for service learning students enrolled in fall 2012 and retained into the spring of 2013 and includes all service learners at the college, and not just those that participate in survey studies. A chi-square test was performed to analyze the relationship between service learning and retention.

### **Results**

During the fall 2013 and spring 2014 semesters, students indicated that their service learning projects positively impacted their academic learning. They also tended to express greater confidence in their general education learning and workplace skills. Students also responded that their service learning experience

Table 1. Impact of Service Learning on Learning Outcomes

	All N=750	Gender Differences		Racial/Ethnic Differences				CTE Status Differences	
		Male N=294	Female N=430	White N=103	Black N=135	Hispanic N=205	Asian N=187	CTE N=283	Non- CTE N=462
<b><i>Academic Content (agree/disagree scale)</i></b>									
The service-learning project helped me learn material from my course more effectively.	76%	75%	77%	74%	80%	76%	75%	82%	72%
I applied what I learned in class during the service-learning experience.	79%	83%	77%	86%	85%	78%	73%	85%	76%
<b><i>General Education Knowledge (confidence scale)</i></b>									
Express ideas, facts, and opinions verbally.	73%	73%	73%	68%	80%	71%	70%	71%	74%
Express ideas, facts, and opinions in writing.	74%	73%	74%	73%	73%	75%	71%	72%	75%
Make a presentation in front of a class or speak in public.	62%	57%	65%	60%	66%	57%	64%	63%	61%
Analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view.	78%	76%	79%	79%	76%	79%	74%	78%	77%
Solve challenging problems.	69%	69%	68%	72%	65%	67%	70%	70%	68%
Compare different approaches to solving a problem.	79%	77%	80%	79%	81%	78%	75%	78%	80%
Ask questions in class.	68%	66%	70%	72%	75%	68%	62%	70%	68%
<b><i>Workplace Skills (confidence scale)</i></b>									
Work with others as a member of a team.	75%	72%	78%	75%	68%	78%	75%	76%	75%
Complete projects and assignments on time.	82%	76%	86%	82%	81%	84%	80%	82%	82%
Follow directions completely.	82%	79%	85%	77%	87%	84%	80%	83%	82%
Respect the opinions of others who might disagree with you.	82%	79%	84%	77%	85%	84%	76%	82%	81%
Communicate with people of different backgrounds or cultures.	84%	80%	86%	84%	83%	89%	80%	82%	85%
Understand values of people who are different from you.	83%	80%	85%	80%	82%	85%	80%	82%	84%
<b><i>Civic Engagement (agree/disagree scale)</i></b>									
The service-learning project helped other people and/or the community partner.	75%	76%	74%	78%	74%	75%	73%	77%	73%
I have a good understanding of the community needs my service-learning project addressed.	71%	71%	71%	74%	75%	75%	63%	77%	67%
I usually volunteer a lot in my community.	36%	36%	35%	39%	39%	31%	36%	37%	35%
As a result of participating in this service-learning project, I will probably volunteer or do service in the community in the future.	63%	60%	66%	58%	72%	63%	61%	69%	60%
How would you rate your overall experience you had in the service-learning	68%	63%	71%	65%	72%	70%	63%	72%	65%

Note: Student responses were based on a five-point Likert-scale. Results listed here were determined by collapsing the highest responses into a single percentage.



increased their interest and knowledge of civic engagement. These results are reported in Table 1.

While students generally reported positive experiences in service learning, certain groups of students reported slightly different experiences than their peers. Differences by gender, race/ethnicity, and course of study are included in Table 1. This table reports student answers to survey questions as a percent of positive responses calculated by collapsing the most positive responses into a single percentage.

### **Impact of ASL on Learning of Academic Content**

A majority of students (76 percent) agreed that ASL projects helped them learn class material more effectively and served as an opportunity to apply what they learn in class (79 percent). Male students (83 percent) were more likely than female students (77 percent) to feel that the ASL project allowed them to apply what they learned in class, but they were equally likely to report that the service learning project helped them learn class materials more effectively. Black students indicated more strongly than other racial/ethnic groups that ASL helped them learn class content more effectively (80 percent). Both white and black students agreed more strongly than Hispanic and Asian students that they applied what they learned in class to their service learning project. Of all groups measured, CTE students agreed most strongly that the project helped them learn course content more effectively (82 percent), while those not in career or technical courses scored lowest on this response (72 percent). Similarly, CTE students reported more strongly than non-CTE that they applied course content during the service learning experience.

### **ASL Impact on General Education Learning**

As a result of participating in a service learning project, students reported more confidence in their ability to express ideas verbally (73 percent) and in writing (74 percent) but were less likely to agree that it strengthened their confidence in presenting in front of their class (62 percent). Students' critical thinking skills (78 percent) and approaches to problem-solving (79 percent) were also positively impacted, though they expressed less confidence in their ability to actually solve challenging problems (69 percent) or ask questions in class (68 percent).

When comparing male-female responses to questions in this category, answers were fairly similar except in the case of making presentations. Males had the lowest response for that survey question (57 percent) while females expressed greater confidence (65 percent).

Comparing responses among racial/ethnic groups on whether the service learning project increased student confidence in these general education skills, black students agreed more strongly than others that ASL positively impacted their verbal expression (80 percent); presenting in class (66 percent); comparing different approaches to solving a problem (81 percent); and asking questions in class (75 percent). Black (65 percent) and Hispanic students (67 percent) expressed the least confidence in their ability to solve challenging problems, as compared to white (72 percent) and Asian (70 percent) students. Hispanics were least confident in their ability to present in front of a class (57 percent). Asian students were least confident in asking questions in class (62 percent).

### **ASL Impact on Workplace Skills**

Development of workplace skills were also positively impacted by service learning participation. Students reported increased confidence working with others as part of a team (75 percent), completing projects on time (82 percent), and following directions (82 percent). Eighty-two percent of the students indicated that service learning increased their respect for other opinions, and had increased their confidence in communicating with people of different backgrounds or cultures (84 percent) and understanding the values of people different than themselves (83 percent).

Female students expressed greater confidence for all questions in this category than male students. The results among the different racial/ethnic groups were much more varied. Black and Hispanic students were more confident than white or Asian students in terms of following directions, respecting the opinions of others and understanding values of people who are different from themselves. Hispanics responded most positively of all students in an increased confidence in communicating with people from different backgrounds (89 percent). Black students expressed the lowest level of confidence in working as a member of a team (68 percent) compared to whites (75 percent), Hispanics (78 percent) and Asians (75 percent).

There were minimal or no differences in responses comparing CTE and non-CTE peers related to the positive impact of the ASL project on workplace skills, increased confidence in communicating with others, or understanding the values of individuals who are different from themselves.

### **ASL Impact on Civic Engagement**

Students tended to agree that their participation in service learning gave them a good understanding of the needs and problems facing society. Overall, 75 percent of students agreed that their project helped the target population with which they worked. Across both semesters, 71 percent of respondents felt that they had a good understanding of the community need addressed by the service learning project. The majority of students who did not agree with this statement indicated that they were unsure about whether the project addressed a community need (24 percent) and only 5 percent of the students thought it did not meet a community need.

Service learning may also have an impact on students' intentions to engage in future volunteer activities. About one-third of students stated that they usually volunteer in the community. After completing a service learning project, nearly two-thirds of students indicated that as a result of service learning they were interested in volunteering within their community in the future. After the ASL experience more females than males responded that they intend to volunteer in their communities in the future. A greater percentage of female students also rated their service learning projects as very good or excellent, compared to male students. Aside from these differences, male-female responses in this category were similar.

The same numbers of white and black students volunteered in their communities (39 percent) prior to the ASL experience. As a result of participating in service learning, the number of black students indicating they will probably volunteer in the future was much greater (72 percent) than the number of white students (58 percent). A lower percentage of Hispanics indicated they currently volunteered (31 percent), but 63 percent indicated they would probably do so in the future. Asian students indicated the lowest levels of agreement among the different racial/ethnic groups as to whether they thought the service learning project helped others and whether they had a good understanding of the community

need. Black and Hispanic students rated their ASL experience more highly than white or Asian students.

CTE students reported a better understanding of the community need than their non-CTE peers. CTE students were more likely than non-CTE students to agree that their service learning project had an impact on other people or the community partner. About one third of CTE and non-CTE students agreed with the statement that they usually volunteer in the community. After completing the ASL project, a greater percentage of CTE students agreed that they would volunteer in the future, compared to non-CTE students. Overall, CTE students rated their ASL experience more highly than non-CTE students.

### **Student Reflections**

Two primary themes emerged from students' reflections. First, students emphasized the significance of applying academic course content in a "real world" setting outside the classroom. One student noted, "Basically it helped me to put my idea, knowledge and the understanding of the course to work." The application of knowledge – in this case, students presenting to senior citizens about the role of nutrition in disease prevention – helps deepen and reinforce students' understanding of the course material. Another student recognized how taking on the role of expert also challenges students to put forward their best effort. "... having the responsibility of explaining to my peers made me learn the content exactly as it was. Wouldn't have been able to half-learn something and give the wrong information. ...this person is relying on me so I will give the best explainable answers I possibly can." This may be particularly important as a way for underserved students to build confidence in their abilities.

Second, students' experiences in service learning provided opportunities to learn and practice workplace skills, including team building, time management, problem solving, and meeting deadlines. A student remarked, "Working together in a group...there is always an alternative route to reach your goals, you just have to find it." Students also discussed how having to complete a project for a community partner encouraged them to stay on task. "The time management was an important skill in this project. Knowing you have a deadline and being able to manage your time to have this project done on time is very important..." Continuing on the theme of expanding skills, a student observed how doing a project, "... made my imagination work in a different ways. It made me think

outside the box. It improved my skills of thinking that there is more than one ways of getting things done.”

### **Student Retention**

Service learning students enrolled in fall 2012 were retained at QCC at a higher rate than the overall student population. Of the 596 students who participated in academic service learning, 84.6 percent were retained in the City University system in spring 2013, as compared to non-service learners with a 77.6 percent rate of retention. A chi-square test of independence was performed and the relationship between having a service learning experience in fall 2012 and QCC retention in spring 2013 was found to be very significant,  $\chi^2(1, N = 15,849) = 40.5$ ,  $p < .001$ . This test ruled out the possibility that the difference in enrollment outcomes between the service learning and comparison group was due to chance.

### **Discussion**

The presented data provide evidence that after participating in service learning, a diverse population of urban community college students report increased confidence in their attainment and application of course content knowledge, general education knowledge, workplace skills and interest in civic engagement. Further, service learning students are retained to a greater degree than non-service learning students.

While a majority of all students included in the study report positive outcomes from academic service learning, the data reveal that CTE students state more confidence in their academic and work-related skills, and they report more interest in future volunteering than liberal arts students, in agreement with our previous study (Ellerton et al, 2014). These findings may result from a number of factors unique to CTE classes in which students may see a stronger alignment of their course work to their career paths. An example is an ASL project in which nursing students impart health education material to seniors at a local senior center. Since health education is a major focus of the nursing profession, the students may view the ASL experience providing them the authentic experience needed to be more proficient in their future career.

ASL's role in civically engaging the community college student is of particular interest. Flanagan et al. (2010) discuss community colleges as the opportune

point for many to learn about society and to begin the process of becoming an engaged citizen. It has been suggested that ASL may be a means to reinstitute citizenship in community college populations at a time when civic engagement is declining (Fiume 2009). Our data support the concept that ASL helps the process of engaging future citizens.

The data reveal some differences among the racial/ethnic groups included in this study. Black students tend to report more benefits from ASL than other students included in this study; they strongly responded to 10 different questions within all four categories. This may support, at least in part, the findings of McNair and Finley (2013) that underserved students may benefit most from high impact practices. However, students of color responded with less confidence than white students along some measures. In particular, black and Hispanic students expressed lower levels of confidence in solving challenging problems. Hispanics were least confident about presenting in front of their peers, while black students reported the least confidence in working as part of a team. Asians appeared to receive the least benefit in the area of civic engagement; they were less likely than their peers to agree that their service learning project helped others or that they understood the community need.

Further research is needed to determine whether the methodology of delivering the service learning experience can impact how strongly students benefit from ASL. In addition, self-reporting through surveys using confidence and agreement scales may not fully capture the depth and complexity of the students' learning experiences. With this in mind, the OASL recently designed several activities to intentionally promote students' understanding of the connections between their service activities and their learning. Reflection prompts are given to students prior to the start of a project and after completion of a project. Students are asked to identify the community need, write about the concepts learned in the course, and articulate how the project met the need and deepened their understanding of the course material. In addition, students describe how they practiced workplace skills throughout the implementation of their project. Structured reflective exercises may provide the students a greater awareness of their own learning process and skill development as well as a deeper understanding of their role in society. In this way, students will also directly connect their learning to its application in the real world. Analysis of these structured reflections may provide a clearer picture of the benefits students

receive from ASL and provide students with the tools they need to enter society as productive citizens.

### **Limitations**

The student survey data are self-reported and students may not accurately report the impact of service learning. Addition of a pre-survey would measure changes over time. The absence of a control or comparison group makes it difficult to determine whether the results are a product of natural maturation rather than from service learning.

Lower scores on certain measures, such as presenting in class, as compared to measures that result in greater confidence such as expressing ideas verbally or in writing, may result from differences in the way service learning was implemented in different classrooms. It is likely that most service learning projects require a lot of reflective writing as well as verbal interaction with the faculty, peers and community partners, while only some service learning projects also require a presentation; it may be unreasonable to expect that presentation skills will improve if a project does not include a presentation component.

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Sharon Ellerton is an associate professor in the Department of Biological Sciences and has served as Queensborough Community College's faculty liaison to service-learning since 2009. In that role, she leads service-learning faculty development workshops, assists faculty to incorporate service-learning into their classrooms, and researches the impact of service-learning on community college students. In addition, Ellerton is a practitioner of service-learning, leading an honors/service-learning program in Anatomy and Physiology and incorporating service-learning into her own coursework.

### **Cristina Di Meo**

Cristina Di Meo serves as the Associate Assessment Analyst in the Queensborough Community College-CUNY Office of Academic Service-Learning (OASL). She has over 15 years' experience conducting research and policy advocacy on economic security issues. Currently, she oversees the OASL assessment initiatives to evaluate the effectiveness of the service-learning pedagogy on student learning outcomes, workplace skills and civic engagement. She has presented locally and nationally on Queensborough's efforts to institutionalize service-learning and the use of service-learning in career and technical disciplines.

### **Josephine Pantaleo**

Jo Pantaleo serves as the Queensborough Community College Director of the Academic Literacy Learning Center, Academic Service-Learning, and eportfolio. She has over 40 years' experience in the education field with specialization in developmental reading, composition, and experiential learning. She is the editor of *Navigating toward Clearer Comprehension with QCC Writers*, *Reading across the Disciplines Reading Strategies Handbook*, and co-contributor of *Test-Taking Tips for the ACT Reading COMPASS Exam and Practice Reading Passages* book. She advocates for active and engaged learning through the use of service-learning pedagogy that encourages civic responsibility. She provides professional development support for faculty who wish to incorporate service-learning activities into their courses, and she coordinates service learning efforts and events between and across faculty, college departments, and community organizations. She has presented both locally and nationally on Queensborough's efforts at institutionalizing service-learning, and most recently, because of her efforts at advocating the use of engaged pedagogies, she was the recipient of the 2009 National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development Award.

**Arlene Kemmerer**

Arlene Kemmerer is a reading specialist who advocates incorporating high impact strategies, such as service-learning and learning communities into the developmental education curriculum. She is a member of SWIG, a student wiki interdisciplinary group, whereby students use ePortfolio for a Transformative Learning Experience and a member of Moving Ahead with ePortfolio (MAeP) project. She has participated in three Pedagogical Research Challenge Awards given by Queensborough Community College to study effective methods of teaching and learning. She is also serving as project director of Placing Effective High Impact Educational Activities and Academic Service-Learning into the Career and Technical Academies and Disciplines grant at Queensborough Community College. She has presented locally and nationally on the use of high impact practices with developmental students.

**Mary Bandziukas**

Mary Bandziukas is community outreach coordinator for the Queensborough Community College (QCC) Office of Academic Service-Learning. She has 18 years' experience in program management and administration, specializing in development of new programs. She has contributed to the implementation of a career mentoring program at QCC as well as the service-learning program, and has presented locally and nationally on their effectiveness. Mary focuses on service-learning projects related to the STEM disciplines and the environment.

**Michael Bradley**

Michael Bradley currently works as an evaluation and research analyst for iMentor, a nonprofit organization that builds mentoring relationships to empower students from low-income communities to graduate high school, succeed in college, and achieve their ambitions. He earned his BA in psychology from Binghamton University. Bradley studied applied psychology, data analysis, and education while working on his MA in Human Development and Social Intervention at New York University. He worked with the coauthors during his studies. Bradley has also worked at The Graduate Center at the City University of New York and Achievement First charter schools.