

Service Learning in Distance Education: *E-Mentoring Project Connect*

Donna R. Everett
d.everett@moreheadstate.edu
Morehead State University
College of Business
Morehead, KY 40351-1689 USA

Abstract

The use of technology is changing the way we communicate and relate to others. The purpose of this paper is to share the results of a pilot e-mentoring project (SLIDE) that took place virtually between one college freshman-level Introduction to Business course and eight high school classrooms. The e-learning activities were augmented through the use of web-conferencing technology to provide more effective experiences for faculty and students. With their ready access to new technologies, higher education institutions are well-positioned to take advantage of rapid changes in technology to enhance communication and collaboration.

Keywords: service learning, technology, e-mentoring, instructional tools, distance learning

1. INTRODUCTION TO SERVICE LEARNING

ser-vice\ 'sɜr-vəs\n: the act of serving: as a helpful act: a good turn
learn\ 'lɜrn\n: to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience
ser-vice learn-ing\n: to gain knowledge, understanding, and experience by doing a helpful act

Service is a habit, and like most habits, it is most effectively developed at an early age. Extensive research studies at all levels of education and in all academic areas show that young people who are involved in service learning projects are more likely to be engaged in civic and community affairs as adults (RMC Research Compendium, 2004). Service learning has been variously defined as an authentic learning experience and effective teaching tool that enhances lives and creates community.

Service learning is also a way that young people can contribute to their community while at the same time receiving something in re-

turn. For example, older students who tutor younger ones not only benefit from the experience of helping younger students do better in school, but studies show they also improve their own academic skills (RMC Research Compendium, 2004).

Elementary students, middle school students, Girl Scouts, and university students are participating in a wide range of activities that provide vital services to the community and show how service-learning is integrating meaningful community service with instruction and reflection in order to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen their communities (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, n.d.).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of recent literature related to service learning shows a common theme: service learning as a planned approach that combines classroom learning with service to an organization, community, or program with the outcome of fostering selfless contributions (Tucker & McCarthy, 2001; Woods, 2002; and Hergert,

2002). A firm foundation for service learning was laid by constructivists, such as Piaget, Papert, and Dewey, who believed that learners should be motivated to attach new meaning to past or even contemporary experiences, thereby enhancing problem solving skills and ensuring a socially responsible citizenry (Papert, 1993 and Ryan & Cooper, 1998). The late Paulo Freire built his teaching methodology of conscientization—defined by Freire as achieving an in-depth understanding of the world that allows for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions—upon the need for his students to use education to transform the world [communities] in which they lived (Freire, 1970). Service learning also reflects a student-centered teaching philosophy whereby a bridge is built from the classroom to the real world for the student by the teacher and the project.

More recent research continues to underscore the role of service learning in enhancing personal growth, supporting curriculum standards, fostering cognitive and professional growth, promoting partnerships, and addressing needs through collaboration and communication. (See the References for an additional list of research studies related to service learning (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, n.d.).

Because it is such an effective teaching and learning strategy, service-learning is often linked to school and college courses; however, it also can be organized and offered by community organizations. Whatever the setting, the core element of service-learning always has the intent that both providers and recipients find the experience beneficial, even transformative.

The purpose of this paper is to present the results of a successful pilot service learning e-project that connected a university classroom with eight high school classrooms. The purpose of the SLIDE: E-Mentoring Project Connect activity was to make contact with and encourage high school students to continue their education in post-secondary education. The project also coincided with the state's higher education goals and initiatives. The secondary purpose for the instructor was to gauge university students' willingness to reach out to others in a meaningful, rich experience.

3. USING TECHNOLOGY IN SERVICE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A study by Seifer and Mihalynuk (2003 and updated in 2005) was undertaken to illustrate the use of technology in service learning. In higher education, technology has had a dramatic impact on teaching and learning, including service-learning experiences. Service-learning classes and activities can be augmented through the use of technology to provide more effective experiences for faculty, students and community participants. With their ready access to new technologies, higher educational institutions are well-positioned to take advantage of rapid changes in the field.

If one of the goals of service-learning is to *create* community as reported in studies by Kaye, 2010; Butin, 2010, Whitehead & Kit-zrow, 2010; and Robinson & Green, 2010), then rapidly evolving technology makes it possible to meet that goal. Technology, such as Blackboard, Wimba Classroom, and web-based social networking tools, such as blogs, Wikis, email, instant messaging, can enhance and mimic the face-to-face classroom environment. However, these tools are only helpful if both mentors and mentees receive training in the effective and appropriate use of these tools.

The current pilot study sought to establish a community of students who could share and learn from each other.

4. DESCRIPTION AND METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

SLIDE: *E-Mentoring Project Connect* was conducted during the fall 2009 semester in a face-to-face Introduction to Business class at a Midwest regional university. The course is required for all School of Business Administration students and is an elective course for other programs across the campus. Generally, about 10% of the students in the course will be outside of the School of Business Administration.

The elements of the pilot project built on the national federally funded initiative called Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). The GEAR UP initiative is designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Ultimately, GEAR UP provides six-year grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. GEAR UP grantees serve an entire cohort of students beginning no later than the seventh grade and follow the cohort through high school. GEAR UP

funds also are used to provide college scholarships to low-income students. Typical activities include career awareness, career readiness, career counseling, study skills, and course preparation—all leading to higher education.

The GEAR UP program has been active in this state due to its high number of low income families and counties. The main grant for the state is administered out of a sister state regional university. In each university where the GEAR UP program resides, representatives are hired to work with students in three to four middle schools or high schools in each university's service region. In this pilot project, the GEAR UP representative at the one selected local high school was already in place and was willing to assist the university faculty member and the high school teachers with the intent of the project.

Prior to the beginning of the pilot project, the university faculty member met twice with the teachers who volunteered to participate in the project. The meeting was set up to acquaint teachers with the purpose of the pilot project, to discuss the technology involved, and to answer questions and concerns.

After becoming familiar with the GEAR UP initiatives in the high schools and counties surrounding this Midwest university, the E-Mentoring Project Connect seemed to be an appropriate vehicle to put high school students and university students in contact with each other. A freshman-level Introduction to Business class had a sufficient number of freshmen and sophomore students to share recent transition experiences from high school to college. This e-mentoring pilot project was the first of its kind in the state to connect university and high school students and to use a web conferencing tool. Monetary support for the pilot project came from the Associate Dean in the School of Business Administration and GEAR UP. The monetary support included purchasing web cameras and microphones, paying for the final luncheon activity, school buses to transport students to the college campus, and for substitute teachers. Printed materials developed by the state GEAR UP administrators were adapted for this pilot project. The project also had the support of the selected high school principal.

Students in the university class were divided into eight groups, corresponding with the eight high school classes that volunteered to be part of the project. The subjects of the high school

classes were Accounting, Financial Services, AP Biology, Chemistry, Help Desk, Yearbook, Pre-Calculus, an alternative GSS program, and two high school work-study students who joined one of the other groups. High school classes met at 8:05, 9:40, 9:45, 11:05, 11:30, 1:40, and 1:45; the mentors selected the time that was available to them. For many of the university students, this project took place outside of class time. The instructor met at the beginning of each scheduled time to monitor the technology and observe the interactions. Purposefully, the instructor did not stay for the entire class time, not wanting to seem to interfere with the discussions. A total of 51 university students (mentors) and 68 high school students (mentees) participated in the pilot project.

To participate virtually in the E-Mentoring Project Connect, eight classrooms were established in the Introduction to Business class Blackboard site, using Wimba Classroom. Wimba is an add-on into Blackboard and presents a variety of teaching tools from web conferencing to podcasting to instant messaging. Teachers of the mentees in the high school were provided with web cams and microphones for the duration of the project. The web cameras and microphones were installed in the high school classrooms by the Help Desk high school students who participated in the pilot project. Archives of the Wimba Classroom sessions were created for follow-up purposes by GEAR UP personnel and the instructor.

The university GEAR UP representative working in this particular high school provided training to the high school students and to the university students. The training underscored the purpose of the pilot project, overview of GEAR UP activities in this high school, and netiquette. A representative from the Distance Learning office at the university provided training to the mentors on how to use Wimba Classroom and related equipment so the mentors could assist the mentees with the technology.

An extensive booklet, written by the university faculty member, provided suggested activities to the mentors that established and kept the conversations going during the semester. A different activity was planned for each week, focusing on getting acquainted, getting to college, acquiring life management skills, and concentrating on the future. The activities were designed to elicit questions and responses from the high school students and for mentors to

share their recent experiences with entry into college life.

The project was a required, graded activity in the university class. Groups were required to meet four times during the semester at the scheduled high school class periods. The university mentors chose their class based on time availability. After each of the required four meetings with the high school students, the experience was discussed in class. The ending activity was a luncheon and campus tour for the high school students where mentees and mentors met face to face. Fifty-five of the 68 high school students and two high school teachers and 45 of the 51 university students participated in the luncheon. Tables were set up by classes so that mentors could sit with their mentees.

Limitations. Only one selected local high school and one university class were included in this pilot project. The nature of the pilot project was exploratory to determine if it had value, it could provide an added dimension to high school students' experiences, and highlight effective mentoring possibilities for university students.

At the conclusion of the pilot project, a formal survey was given to the mentors. Lack of time prevented getting feedback from the mentees—a recognized weakness of the study. However, the project met the secondary intent of the instructor—to gauge university students' willingness to reach out to others.

5. SURVEY RESULTS

At the conclusion of the entire e-mentoring pilot project, a 21-question survey was administered to the mentors. The survey was adapted from the formal GEAR UP survey. In order to fit into the purpose of the wider GEAR UP initiatives, the questions on the survey were adapted for this pilot project. Although results are available for all 21 questions, only results of 8 of the 21 questions are presented below. These eight questions appeared to have the most relevance to the purpose of this pilot project.

Informal anecdotal feedback was elicited from the high school teachers and mentees at the face to face luncheon but is not reported formally here. For the most part, the anecdotal feedback was positive and helpful for future projects. The timing of the luncheon and cam-

pus tour did not lend itself to a more formal survey.

The formal survey of mentors was completed by 39 of 51 students for a 76.5% returned. Results of the selected questions relevant to the pilot project are presented in table format below.

Table 1 below shows the results of the question: *Did you always plan to go to college?* Results show that 94.8% of the mentors planned to go to college.

Table 1.

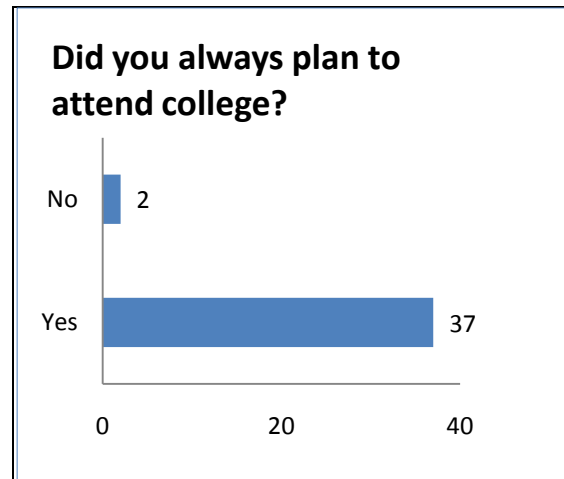


Table 2.

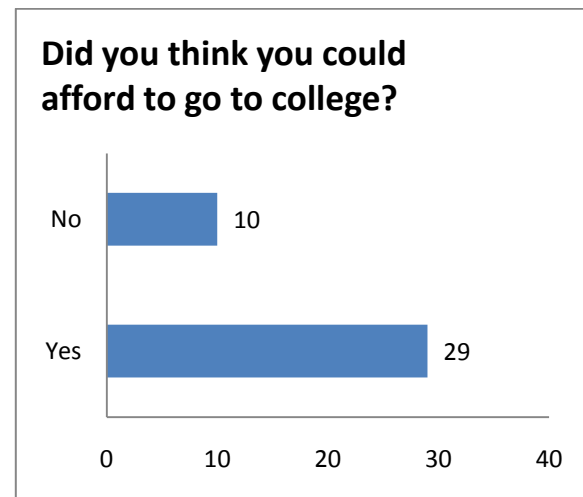


Table 2 focuses on the question, *Did you think you could afford to go to college?* The mentors were positive about being able to afford to go to college. Eighty percent (80%) of the stu-

dents on this Midwest university campus are supported by financial aid and scholarships.

Table 3 below shows responses to the question, *Has anyone in your immediate family graduated from college?* About half of the students have family members who had graduated from college. Of note, 60% of the graduates from this Midwest university are first-generation college graduates according to the university's Institutional Research office.

Table 3.

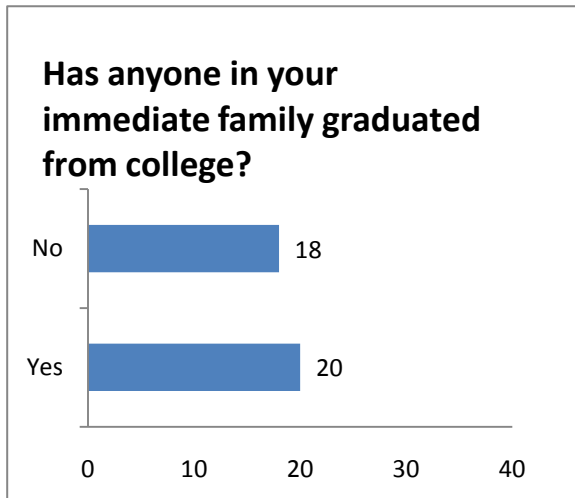


Table 4 below shows input to the question, *Did anyone talk to you about going to college?* Responses indicated that a combination of someone at school and parents seemed to be the most likely persons to have talked to these students about going to college.

Table 4.

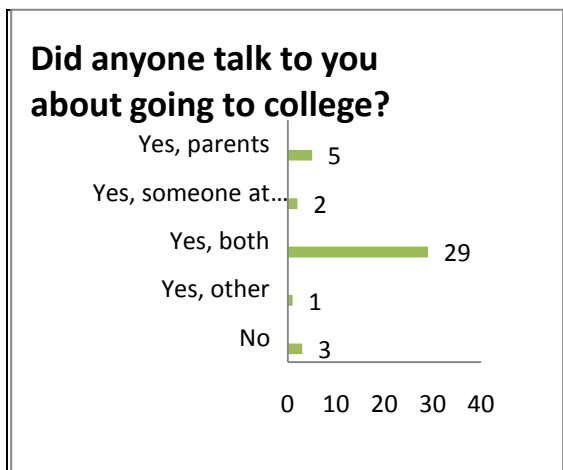


Table 5 below provides the responses to the question, *Do you think going to college/training beyond high school is important?* Of the respondents, 94.87% felt that going to college or obtaining training beyond high school was important.

Table 5.

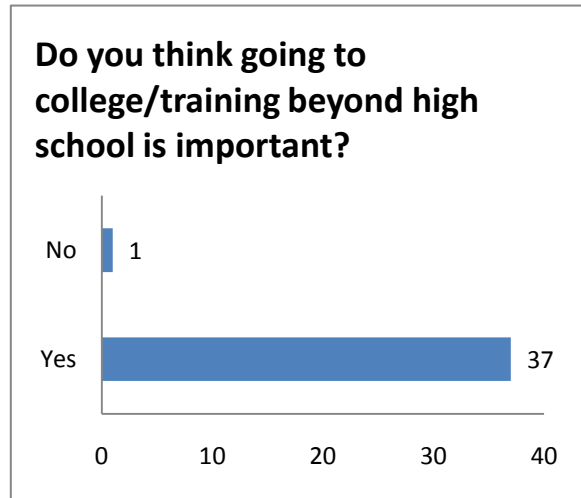
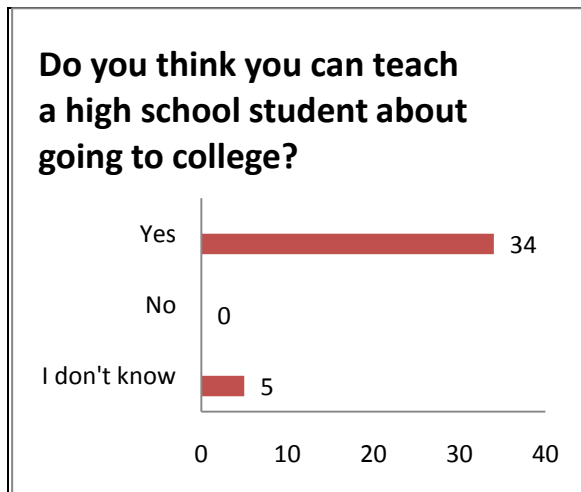


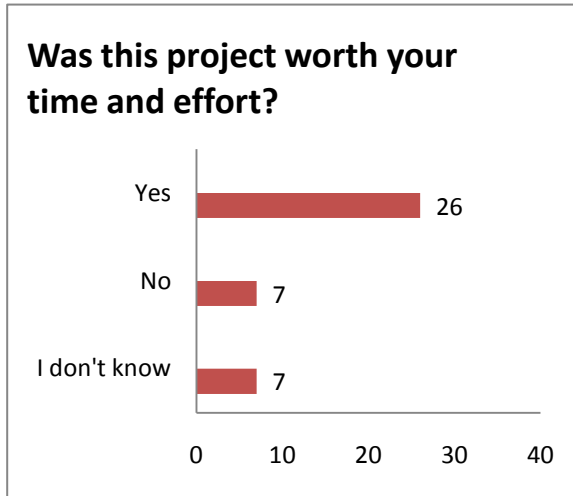
Table 6 below displays the responses to the question about whether an e-mentoring project can assist students in making a decision about going to college. As shown, 87% of the mentors felt what they were doing could make a difference.

Table 6.



The result of the question, *Was this project worth your time?*, is presented below in Table 7. Responses show that 66.6% of the mentors said Yes.

Table 7.



A final question asked if they would recommend continuing the project in this class. Responses indicated that 71% of the mentors would recommend continuing the project.

The results of the survey completed by the mentors showed positive feedback toward college and the *E-Mentoring Project Connect* assignment. The feedback also underscored the appropriateness of the project in both classrooms

6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An area of the survey asked for additional comments. Written comments from the mentors covered areas, such as issues with the technology, lack of attention at times on the part of high school students, enthusiasm and engagement in the project, the

feeling of being able to connect with the high school students, and the opportunity to ask and answer questions. Overall, the instructor of the project felt that the mentors received the level of engagement from the high school students as they were willing to put into the project. The face-to-face luncheon was a highly successful culminating project, as both sets of students were engaged and enthusiastic.

Overall, this pilot service learning project was worth the time and effort of the instructor to prepare for it. Secondly, the instructor felt that college students were willing to reach out to others and share their experiences. Specific recommendations include the following:

1. Begin from the first day of class to prepare both sets of students with the idea of ser-

vice learning—what it is, its value, and its preparation for participating in community service—even if the community is insular. Relate the value of service learning to their career preparation and the role of social responsibility in business.

2. Visit classrooms in the high school more frequently to be sure equipment and technology are in place and operational and that mentees and teachers are comfortable with them. Two meetings were held with the high school teachers prior to the start of the project.
3. Have a “trial run” in the Wimba Classroom with whole class engagement by the mentors. Most students bring laptop computers to class and it would be easy to set up. In this way, they can “see” for themselves how the technology works and how they can contribute to project.

Another advantage of the “trial run” is to help the mentees feel comfortable in a distance learning classroom. With the growth of enrollments in online learning, any activity that can prepare students to succeed in this environment is helpful.

4. Even with whole class preparation, the instructor should attend all of the meetings to assist mentees and mentors with the discussion and seriousness of the project. The instructor has the vision for the outcome; this can only be shared and embraced if the instructor is involved fully. The assumption may have been made that the mentors were better off in peer groups without instructor participation. Remarks by the mentors and mentees proved otherwise.
5. Recognize that a project of this kind is time intensive. In this pilot project, the time at the end of the pilot project to receive mentee feedback was lacking and failed to present a balanced picture of the whole experience.

In conclusion, service learning in any environment is worth the class time and personal time. It is a habit worth developing. It is another instructional tool for instructors to consider when developing their courses and choosing teaching strategies.

Service learning aims to build knowledge, character, and community skills in young people by combining service to the community with academic learning. By directly linking service

to the academic curriculum and instructional goals, service learning creates a place for service that is integrated into a teacher's or school's core mission: education. Instead of becoming one more burden on the already busy lives of teachers and students, service learning strives to make their lives easier by combining academic instruction with community involvement. Because it expands the traditional classroom beyond its walls, it can be an exciting, transparent addition to a class. For students, service learning can add a dimension to their learning and focus on talents and interests not yet discovered.

7. REFERENCES

- Butin, D. W. (2010). *Service-Learning in Theory and Practice: The Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.
- GEAR UP. Retrieved on June 9, 2010, from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/gearup/index.html>.
- Hergert, L. (2002). Snapshots of service-learning: Factors for its integration and sustainability in school districts. *Educational Horizons*, 80, 195-199.
- Kaye, C. B. (2010) *Complete Guide to Service Learning, (The): Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action*. 2nd Edition. Minneapolis, MN: The Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.
- National Service Learning Clearinghouse. n.d. Retrieved June 9, 2010, from <http://www.servicelearning.org>.
- Papert, S. (1993) *The children's machine: Rethinking school in the age of the computer*. New York: HarperCollins Publisher.
- RMC Research. (2004). K-12 service-learning literature: 1999-2003. Retrieved from http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/bibs/k-12_bibs/k-12_lit_99-03/index.php. (Accessed July 28, 2010)
- Robinson, J. W. & Green, G. P. (2010). *Introduction to Community Development: Theory, Practice, and Service-Learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ryan, K. & Cooper, J. (1998). *Those who can, teach*. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Seifer, S. D. and Mihalynuk, T.V. *Community-Campus Partnerships for Health*, September, 2003 Updated: May 2005.
- Tucker, M. & McCarthy, A. (2001). Presentation self-efficacy: Increasing communication skills through service-learning. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 13, 227-244.
- Whitehead, G. I. & Kitzrow, A. P. *Introduction to Community Development: Theory, Practice, and Service-Learning*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Wimba: People Teaching People. Retrieved on June 9, 2010, from <http://www.wimba.com/>.
- Woods, W. (2002). Service learning as a vehicle for innovation. *The Agricultural Education Magazine*, 74, 26-27.

Additional Service Learning Research Resources

- Ammon, M. S., Furco, A., Chi, B., & Middaugh, E. (2002). *Service-learning in California: A profile of the CalServe service-learning partnerships, 1997-2000*. Berkeley: University of California, Service-Learning Research and Development Center.
- Bailis, L. N. (2000). *Taking service-learning to the next level: Emerging lessons from the national community development program*. Springfield, VA: National Society for Experiential Education.
- Billig, S. H. (2002a). Adoption, implementation, and sustainability of K-12 service-learning. In A. Furco & S. H. Billig (Eds.) *Advances in service-learning research: Vol.1. Service-learning: The essence of the pedagogy* (pp. 245-267). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Billig, S. H. (2002b). *W.K. Kellogg Foundation retrospective of K-12 service-learning projects, 1990-2000*. Denver, CO: RMC Research Corporation.
- Billig, S. H., & Brodersen, R. M. (2007). *Case studies of effective practices in the partnership in character education project: Evaluation for the School District of Philadelphia*. Denver, CO: RMC Research Corporation.

- Billig, S. H., Root, S., & Jesse, D. (2005). The relationship between quality indicators of service-learning and student outcomes: Testing professional wisdom. In S. Root, J. Callahan, & S. H. Billig (Eds.), *Advances in service-learning research: Vol. 5. Improving service-learning practice: Research on models to enhance impacts* (pp. 97–115). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Blyth, D., Saito, R., & Berkas, T. (1997). A quantitative study of the impact of service-learning programs. In A. Waterman (Ed.), *Service-learning: Applications from the research* (pp. 39–55). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Bradley, R., Eyler, J., Goldzweig, I., Juarez, P., Schlundt, D., & Tolliver, D. (2007). Evaluating the impact of peer-to-peer service-learning projects on seat belt use among high school students. In S. Gelmon & S. Billig (Eds.), *Advances in service-learning research: Vol.7. From passion to objectivity: International and cross-disciplinary perspectives on service-learning research* (pp. 89–110). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Catalano, R. F., Haggerty, K. P., Oesterle, S., Fleming, C. B., & Hawkins, J. D. (2004). The importance of bonding to school for healthy development: Findings from the Social Development Research Group. *Journal of School Health, 74*(7), 252–261.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D., Jr. (1997). The importance of program quality in service-learning. In A. S. Waterman (Ed.), *Service-learning: Applications from the research* (pp. 57–76). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Eyler, J., Giles, D., & Schmiede, A. (1996). *A practitioner's guide to reflection in service-learning*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University.
- Furco, A. (2002). Is service-learning really better than community service? A study of high school service program outcomes. In A. Furco & S. H. Billig (Eds.), *Advances in service-learning research: Vol.1. Service-learning: The essence of the pedagogy* (pp. 23–50). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Greene, D., & Diehm, G. (1995). Educational and service outcomes of a service integration effort. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 2*, 54–62.
- Hammond, L., & Heredia, S. (2002, Spring). Fostering diversity through community service learning. *Service-Learning Network, 9*(1), 2–5.
- Hart, S. (2007). Service-learning and literacy motivation: Setting a research agenda. In S. Gelmon & S. Billig (Eds.), *Service-learning from passion to objectivity: International and cross-disciplinary perspectives on service-learning research* (pp. 135–156). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Keith, N. Z. (1997). *Doing service projects in urban settings*. In A. S. Waterman (Ed.), *Service-learning: Applications from the research*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Kirkham, M. (2001). *Sustaining service-learning in Wisconsin: What principals, teachers, and students say about service-learning, 2000–2001*. Madison: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
- LaPointe, L. (2004, Spring). *American Indian service-learning*. *The Generator, 28*.
- Melchior, A., & Orr, L. (with Bloomquist, J., Leiter, V., Berg, J., Grobe, T., & Nahas, J.). (1995, December). Final report: National evaluation of Serve-America (Subtitle B-1). Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates.
- Morgan, W., & Streb, M. (2003). First do no harm: The importance of student ownership in service-learning. *Metropolitan Universities, 13*(3), 321–345.
- Scales, P., Roehlkepartain, E., Neal, M., Kielsmeier, J., & Benson, P. (2006). Reducing academic achievement gaps: The role of community service and service-learning. *Journal of Experiential Education, 29*(1), 38–60.
- Shumer, R. (1997). Learning from qualitative research. In A. S. Waterman (Ed.), *Service-learning: Applications from the research* (pp. 25–38). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Simmons, V. C., & Toole, P. (2003, April). *Service-learning diversity/Equity Project research report executive summary*. *The Generator, 1–4*. Retrieved May 31, 2007, from www.nylc.org/objects/inaction/initiatives/DiversityEqui-

[ty/summer03articles/1EDEXSummary2003.pdf](#)

Spring, K, Dietz, N., & Grimm, R. (2006, March). *Educating for active citizenship: Service-learning, school-based service and youth civic engagement*. Washington, DC: Corporation for National & Community Service.

Vang, K. (2004–2005, Winter). *Engaging the voices from the rim: Refugees, immigrants, migrants, and service-learning in urban communities*. *The Generator*, 21–23.

Wade, R. C. (1997). *Community service-learning: A guide to including service in the public school curriculum*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Waterman, A. (1993). Conducting research on reflective activities in service-learning. In H. Silcox (Ed.), *A how-to guide to reflection: Adding cognitive learning to community service programs* (pp. 90–99). Philadelphia: Brighton Press.

Youniss, J., McLellan, J., Su, A., & Yates, M. (1999). The role of community service in identity development: Normative, unconventional, and deviant orientations. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 14(2), 248–261.