Service-Learning and the First-Year Experience

For new students, service-learning creates meaningful connections with the community and deeper interactions with faculty and peers while enhancing their sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). In spring 2011, approximately 40% of fulltime, first-year students participated in a course that included a community-based project (*NSSE Annual Results 2011*). Those attending private institutions (49%) were more likely to participate than those attending public institutions (38%).

Consistent with previous studies, students who participated in service-learning reported significantly higher gains in several areas of learning and development (Table 1). The differences were moderate in size, with the largest being self-reported gains in knowledge and skills related to contributing to community welfare.

Table 1: Comparison of Service-Learning Participants to Non-Participants[a]		
Institutional Contribution to Perceived Gains	**Sig.[b]**	**ES[c]**
Working effectively with others	***	.29
Voting in local, state (provincial), or national (federal) elections	***	.29
Understanding yourself	***	.27
Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	***	.32
Solving complex real-world problems	***	.31
Developing a personal code of values and ethics	***	.32
Contributing to the welfare of your community	***	.49

[a] t-tests comparing mean score differences between SL and non-SL students
[b] *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
[c] ES (effect size) = mean difference divided by the pooled standard deviation. Generally an effect size of .20 is considered small, .50 medium, and .80 and higher large.

Faculty and staff directing service-learning programs may want to assess their participants for similar results and whether service-learning is related to other engagement experiences.