

DOES SERVICE LEARNING HELP STUDENTS SUCCEED?

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Through Service Learning, students learn while serving the community. This “educational approach ties relevant community service to academic content and uses critical reflection activities to strengthen learning and developmental outcomes” (www.csufresno.edu/sl/). Studies have shown (Astin, et.al., 2000; Eyer, et.al., 2001) that Service Learning (SL) helps students improve their academic performance, build leadership skills, strengthen their sense of community, gain professional and career advantages, foster personal development, and cultivate a lifelong civic and service ethic.

At Fresno State, “engaging with the region” is one of our strategic goals. Adopting effective teaching methods is a goal in our Academic Plan. SL is one of the means by which engagement and active, experiential learning are achieved. Since 2005-06, the number of SL classes has grown from 124 to 160 in 2007-08. The number of students participating increased from 3,660 to 3,774. Approximately 10% of 2007-08 Fresno State graduates completed a SL course. The university has supported SL since the early 1990s. In 2007, Fresno State received a \$3.5 million donation to launch the Jan and Bud Richter Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning to continue and expand those activities.

So, more faculty members are using SL. More students are participating. And the university and Fresno community are supporting this method of teaching and learning. But does SL show positive effects for Fresno State students?

Demographics and Academic Preparation

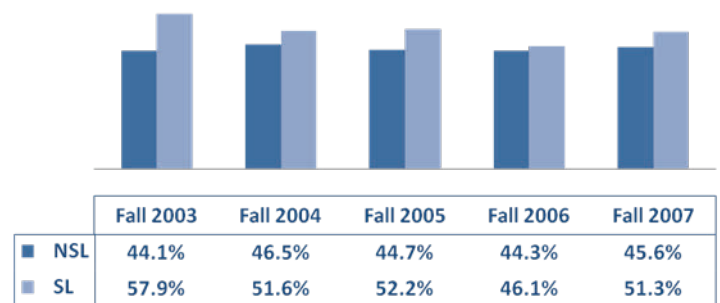
SL students are slightly more likely to enter as freshmen than as transfers. They are more likely to be female and a little more likely to be White and to need Math remediation than non-SL students.

Academic Performance

Does SL improve academic performance?

Students who took SL as seniors were more likely than seniors who did not take SL to graduate within one year after taking the class (even when controlling for cumulative units earned and other factors) (Chart 1). This was true for seniors who entered as first-time freshmen or as transfers.

Chart 1: One-Year Graduation Rates for Seniors*



* One-year graduation rates refer to the percentages of students who graduated in one year after taking Service Learning classes.

Seniors who did not graduate within one year after taking an SL class persisted into the next year at higher rates than comparable non-SL students (again, even when controlling for cumulative units earned and other factors) (Chart 2).

The difference between SL and non-SL seniors on time to degree is very small and not consistently different across the 5 cohorts included in this analysis.

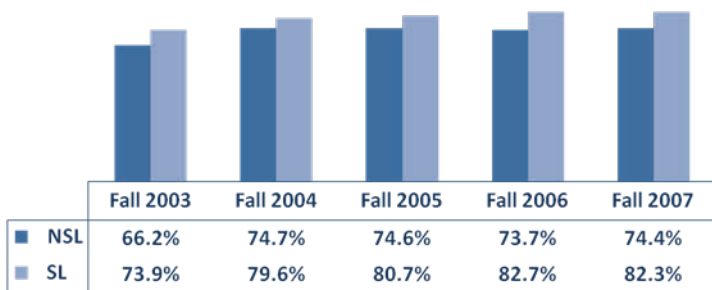
Freshmen who took an SL class had a higher 4-year graduation rate than non-SL freshmen until controlling for High School GPA and SAT scores. Being prepared for college outweighs the effect of SL for these students. The 5-year graduation rate though continues to show SL as influential. SL freshmen’s one-year persistence rates

after taking the class are higher than for non-SL freshmen (Chart 3).

Comparing SL and non-SL course sections, there is no difference in the average grade earned. SL sections show a slightly higher passing rate overall, but not consistently across semesters and in some semesters it is even lower than non-SL on average. Overall, the withdrawal rate is slightly lower for SL than non-SL classes, but again, this pattern is not consistent across semesters.

Since we have SL courses that were “officially” designated “S” courses and those that were SL courses but not so designated, we compared average grade as well as pass and withdrawal rates for these two categories. Pass rate showed the only difference and it was very small and inconsistent across semesters. In the first three semesters “S” designated classes had a higher pass rate and in the last three semesters, a lower pass rate.

Chart 2: One-Year Persistence Rates for Seniors*



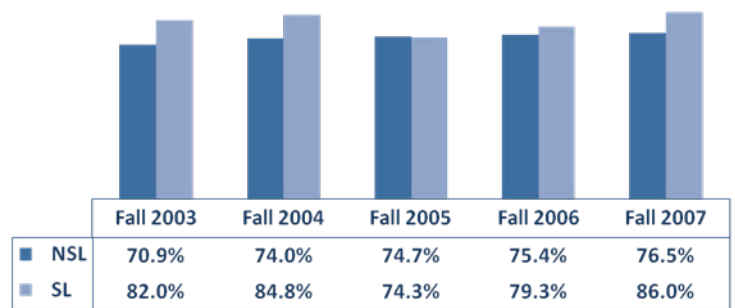
* One -year persistence rates refer to the percentages of seniors who persisted in the next fall semester after taking SL classes in the given fall semester if not graduated.

Personal Growth and Job Skills

Does SL foster personal growth? How about job skills?

Linking the 2007 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data to IRAP databases, we examined the survey’s personal growth and job-related items to determine whether differences exist between students who had taken a SL class and those who had not. Although differences are small, SL students rated Fresno State’s contribution to their personal and job-related growth higher than did non-SL students. For example, SL students report higher quality relationships with people, including those from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, and they work

Chart 3: One-Year Retention Rates for Freshmen*



* One -year retention rates refer to the percentages of freshmen who returned in the next fall semester after taking SL classes in a given fall semester. Includes all freshmen, not just first-time freshmen.

more effectively with others. They report a higher level of job-related knowledge and skills acquisition and a greater contribution to the welfare of the community.

Conclusion

Only over time, through what students do after they’ve graduated, can we know whether SL at Fresno State fosters career advantage and a lifelong civic and service ethic. But our findings in this study support the existing literature. Service Learning helps students succeed in college.

To read the full report click:
http://www.csufresno.edu/irap/research/reports_studies.shtml

References

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