



# TALK IT UP

## ADVOCATING FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

EDITION THREE

## MOBILIZING SERVICE-LEARNING STUDENTS AS ADVOCATES

By *Jamaal Young*

**SERVICE-LEARNING SHOULD TRANSFORM STUDENTS INTO COMPELLING ADVOCATES. YET THIS DOES NOT HAPPEN OFTEN ENOUGH. WHY?**

Effective advocacy is a demonstration of deep support and belief in a cause. Most service-learning students do not think of themselves as advocates for service-learning—they have not been sold on the idea that service-learning is worthy of support. If service-learning is to become a core element of every student's experience, then service-learning students themselves must come to believe in it as advocates.

I am a service-learning advocate. My ability and desire to serve in this role come from having many experiences with service-learning throughout my education. I would like service-learning supporters to consider how these experiences helped make me a service-learning advocate.

**Service-learning showed me the importance of exploring social problems.** Service-learning projects should push students to think critically about their relationship to their communities. For example, in my high school Spanish classes we used our language skills in providing direct service to Mexican migrant workers. This project greatly improved my speaking ability and also helped a group of suburban students look beyond themselves and examine the root causes of economic need. This type of inquiry is vital to preparing students to be active participants in society.

**Through service-learning, I came to see the power of my voice as a young person.** In my Spanish class, we explored critical issues related to farmworkers, spoke with the workers, and reflected on our experiences through com-

munity presentations. However, the experience would have been even more powerful had it included students in the entire service-learning process. The social issues to be examined and how we would address them had been decided before we walked into the classroom. We never considered the role of public policy, for example, in creating or alleviating the migrants' problems. Thus, we did not do the kind of rigorous thinking that would have helped us determine what more we might do through such citizen roles as organizing and advocating. In other words, we did not feel ownership of our work.

I had a very different experience in another high school class. As part of a class on leadership, students learned how to be "service-learning youth consultants." We gained the skills entailed in project planning, implementation, evaluation, and advocacy. We then decided together what conferences we would attend, what type of workshops we would do, and in what aspect of service-learning we would develop an expertise. This process gave us ownership over our work and made us willing to serve as advocates.

**Well-taught service-learning should offer students voice, ownership, and support for critical thinking about their roles in a participatory democracy.** It is this *combination* that sold me on service-learning. In several service-learning experiences I had to wrestle with my own ideas on issues such as homelessness and illiteracy. Teachers pushed me to think critically about the root causes of community and social problems. I had to discover what issues were important to me. And in my work as a service-learning youth consultant, teachers and administrators respected my perspectives, talents, and decisions. In essence, service-

learning showed me that my work and voice could make a difference in addressing issues I cared about. These experiences modeled effective democratic participation and gave me a stake in the value of service-learning—that’s why I became an effective and passionate advocate for service-learning.

Reflecting on what I have learned as a service-learning student and advocate, I am eager to mobilize students for service-learning advocacy and would like to enlist other service-learning practitioners and advocates in this effort:

**1 Promote service-learning that engages students in more rigorous inquiry.** Support students in selecting issues they think are important, help them locate the information they need to think carefully about the root causes of a problem, and assist them with developing service-learning projects in which they can make real decisions of consequence. In this way, you’ll engage students’ interests, foster their asking hard questions, and encourage their acting as responsible citizens in the here and now. In turn, students who are excited by what they can accomplish through service-learning (and are more skillful in doing so) are more likely to support and promote service-learning.

**2 Support students pursuing civic service-learning, especially in their own schools.** Take students’ interests seriously. Allow them to explore issues of importance to them and select a course of action. Give them a real chance to participate in governance and problem solving within their schools.

**3 Make service-learning students integral to your advocacy efforts.** Be sure that students are partners, not “props” in service-learning advocacy. When service-learning advocates try to figure out how to recruit “important stakeholders for service-learning,” they focus on policy-makers, principals and parents. Service-learning students don’t make the list except as occasional “spokespeople.” Young people involved in service-learning are our largest constituency and should be viewed as our largest group of potential advocates.

Because I was fortunate enough to have mentors who respected the ideal of students as active and contributing citizens, I have been able to advocate for service-learning at the local, state, national, and international levels. I believe in the efficacy of service-learning because its truest practi-

*If service-learning is to become a core element of every student’s experience, then service-learning students themselves must come to believe in it as advocates.*

tioners believed in me. If we engage service-learning students as active citizens seeking just and democratic solutions to pressing social problems and if we respect their talent, their voices, and their contributions, we will have gone a long way toward making service-learning a cause in which our most important constituents and advocates—students—believe.

**JAMAAL YOUNG** will graduate this spring from the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He is a graduate of Spring Valley High School in Columbia, SC, a National Service-Learning Leader School, and has served on the Steering Committee and the Interim Executive Committee for the National Service-Learning Partnership.

---

To order the National Commission on Service-Learning’s final report, *Learning In Deed: The Power of Service-Learning in American Schools* or the associated videos, call 1-800-819-9997 or email [WKKFORD@iserv.net](mailto:WKKFORD@iserv.net).