

**National Survey of Student Engagement 2011:
Service-Learning Participation and Institutional Contribution to Perceived Gains**

At UMass Dartmouth, 326 full-time first-year students and 187 full-time seniors participated in the spring 2011 administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Among full-time first-year students, approximately 35% reported that they had at least sometimes participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course during the 2010-2011 school year (Table 1)¹. Comparatively, 58% of full-time seniors reported that they had at least sometimes participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course during the current school year. According to the report *NSSE Annual Results 2011*, service-learning participation rates for students from all participating NSSE institutions were 41% for full-time first-year students and 50% for full-time seniors.

Table 1. Percentage of Students Who Participated in Service-Learning (NSSE 2011)^a

Full-time First-Year Students		Full-time Seniors	
UMass Dartmouth	All NSSE Institutions	UMass Dartmouth	All NSSE Institutions
35%	41%	58%	50%

a/ Service-learning participants were identified as those students who indicated that they had at least sometimes participated in a community-based project (e.g., service learning) as part of a regular course during the current school year.

This report compares self-reported gains in areas of learning and development assessed by the NSSE 2011 survey according to service-learning participation for both full-time first-year students and full-time seniors. Analyses were modeled after those found in the May 2013 *NSSE Research Brief #1: Promoting High-Impact Practices: Maximizing Educational Gains*. The May 2013 report stressed that high-impact practices like service-learning have been linked to positive educational outcomes, such as increased academic engagement and learning.

Service Learning and Perceived Gains

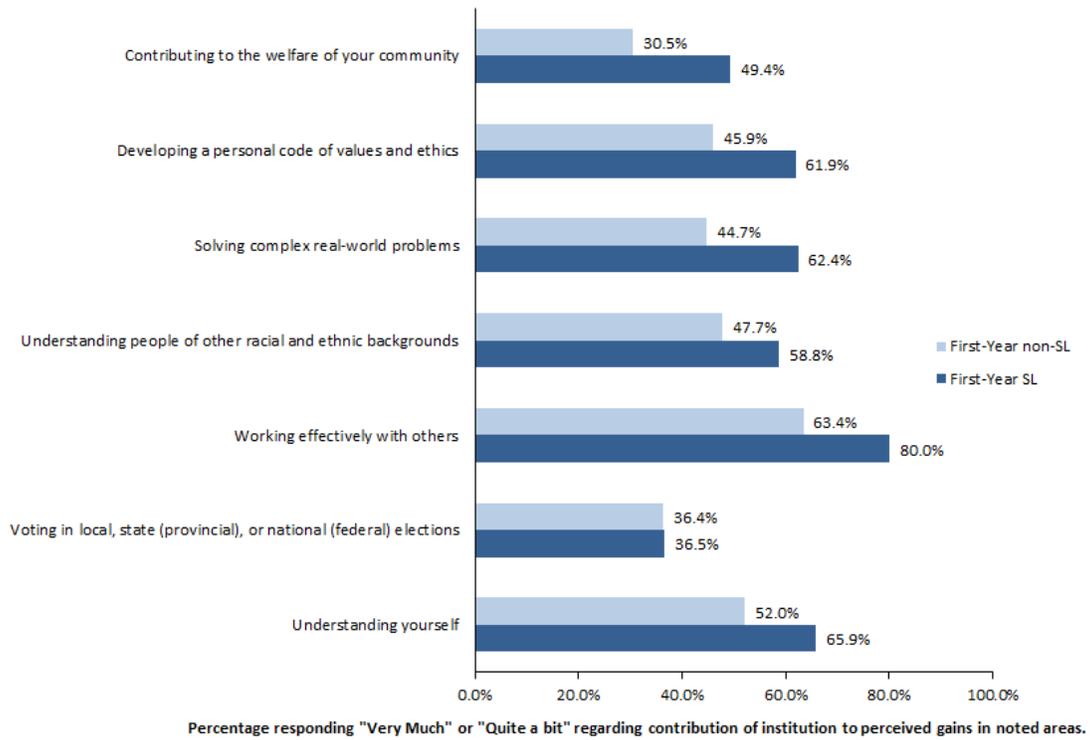
Full-time first-year students and full-time seniors who participated in service-learning perceived more gains in several areas of learning and development assessed by NSSE (Figures 1 and 2). Specifically, both full-time first-year students and full-time seniors who participated in service-learning reported larger gains than their peers in their knowledge, skills, and personal development related to the following areas:

- Contributing to the welfare of your community
- Developing a personal code of values and ethics
- Solving complex real-world problems
- Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds
- Working effectively with others
- Understanding yourself

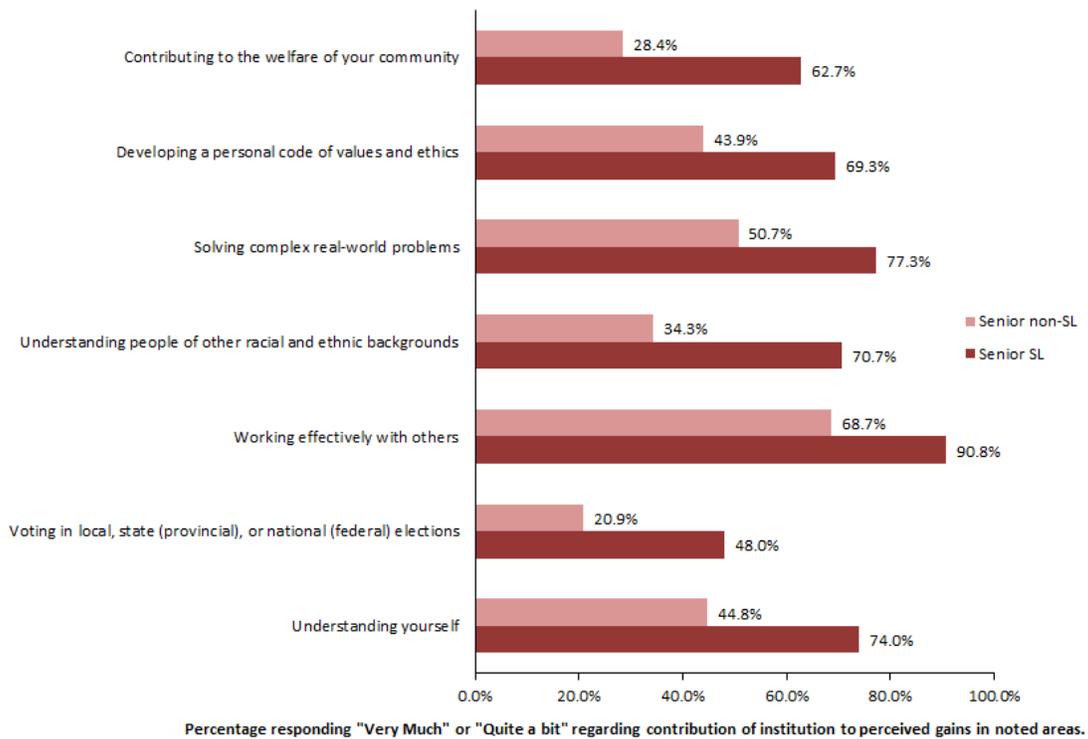
Full-time seniors also reported larger gains than their peers in their knowledge, skills, and personal development related to voting in local, state (provincial), or national (federal) elections.

¹ Valid percentages are shown here and throughout the report (i.e., percentages reflect only students who responded to relevant questions).

**Figure 1. Substantial Perceived Gains by Service-Learning (SL) Participation:
UMass Dartmouth First-Year Students (NSSE 2011)**



**Figure 2. Substantial Perceived Gains by Service-Learning (SL) Participation:
UMass Dartmouth Seniors (NSSE 2011)**



Service Learning and the First-Year Experience

It is recommended that students have the opportunity to participate in at least two high-impact practices, such as service-learning, during their university experience with one being during the critical first year². Full-time first-year students who participated in service-learning reported significantly higher gains in several areas of learning and development assessed by NSSE (Table 2). Service-learning participants and their peers differed significantly in self-reported gains related to working effectively with others, understanding yourself, solving complex real-world problems, developing a personal code of values and ethics, and contributing to the welfare of your community. The differences of the greatest magnitude pertained to working effectively with others and contributing to the welfare of your community.

Table 2. Comparison of Service-Learning (SL) Participants to Non-Participants:
UMass Dartmouth First-Year Students (NSSE 2011)^a

Institutional Contribution to Perceived Gains	Sig. ^b	ES ^c
Working effectively with others	***	0.55
Voting in local, state (provincial), or national (federal) elections		
Understanding yourself	**	0.39
Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds		
Solving complex real-world problems	**	0.47
Developing a personal code of values and ethics	*	0.35
Contributing to the welfare of your community	***	0.52

a/ t-tests comparing mean score differences between SL and non-SL students

b/ *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

c/ ES (effect size): generally, an effect size of .20 is considered small, .50 medium, and .80 or higher large (only calculated when significant mean differences found)

Differences between Service-Learning Participants and Their Peers

According to assessment results from NSSE, service-learning participation appears to be associated with self-reported gains in areas of learning and development. However, an important related question is whether students who participate in service-learning differ in any significant ways from their peers who do not participate in service-learning. If there are any significant differences in the background characteristics of participants and non-participants, then any self-reported gains could be attributed in some way to these background differences rather than service-learning participation. For both full-time first-year students and full-time seniors, service-learning participants and their peers were compared in terms of SAT composite scores, gender, race, and first-generation college student status. Any significant differences between participants and non-participants that were found had a small effect size except for differences regarding SAT composite score. Average composite SAT scores were moderately lower for both full-time first-year students and full-time seniors who participated in service-learning (Table 3).

Table 3. Mean Composite SAT Scores by Service-Learning Participation (NSSE 2011)

Full-time First-Year Students		Full-time Seniors	
SL Participant	Non-SL Participant	SL Participant	Non-SL Participant
969	1,050	982	1,050

² See the May 2013 report, *NSSE Research Brief #1: Promoting High-Impact Practices: Maximizing Educational Gains*.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, there is an association between participation in service-learning and perceived gains in areas of learning and development for both full-time first-year students and full-time seniors. For full-time first-year students, the differences of the greatest magnitude from results of NSSE 2011 pertained to working effectively with others and contributing to the welfare of your community. Generally, students who participated in service-learning and their nonparticipating peers did not differ in any notable significant ways except in terms of SAT composite scores. Average composite SAT scores were moderately lower for both full-time first-year students and full-time seniors who participated in service-learning. Research has found that students of lower academic ability who participate in high-impact practices like service-learning benefit even more from such practices than their peers³. Thus, the extent of differences found in self-reported gains between service-learning participants and their peers could be attributed in some way to the compensatory effects of participating in high-impact practices for lower academic ability students. At the same time, it has also been stressed that not only at risk students but *all* students benefit from participating in high-impact practices like service-learning. Therefore, while perceived gains may be greatest for lower academic ability students, all students would likely experience some benefit from service-learning participation.

³ See Kuh, G., Cruce, T., Shoup, R., Kinzie, J., and Gonyea, R. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540-563.