

Afterschool Supports Service Opportunities from Youth to Young Adulthood

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Vibrant social connections and robust community involvement are part of what makes a strong America.¹ Yet, among our nation's young people, there are relatively low levels of community engagement.² Research shows that service learning is an established method to bring youth closer to their communities while also promoting positive youth development outcomes. What is more, young adults are able to make similar personal and professional gains when participating in forms of service, like national service programs, that provide a substantive, experiential opportunity. Although the acts of service involving youth will look different from service involving young adults, there is a way for all individuals, regardless of age, to engage in and benefit from service opportunities. The afterschool field is a critical partner to expand access and availability of service opportunities for youth and young adults alike. Together with education and community leaders, afterschool and summer learning programs are working toward the healthy development of both the next generation and our democracy.

Youth and young adults are missing out on the benefits of service

According to a study conducted by the University of Maryland's Do Good Institute, volunteering has declined across every age group since 2005, with the percentage of young people volunteering remaining relatively low and stagnant.³ Yet, the study also points to data showing that civic drive among incoming college freshman is at an all-time high.* The vast majority of surveyed students wanted to help others who are in difficulty (77.5 percent), nearly half wanted to become leaders in their communities (43.1 percent), and more than a third considered it very important to participate in a community action program (35.8 percent).⁴

Research has found that community engagement plays a role in building social capital. Youth and young adults who volunteer are less likely to be disconnected from work and school, and have greater economic opportunity.⁵ Despite these positive impacts of community engagement, the desire to be a positive force in the community is not translating into action.

*Since the Census first began tracking these attitudes in the mid-1960s.

Service opportunities at school: for some, not all

Schools at all levels recognize the important role they play in exposing youth and young adults to ways to give back to their community. According to the most recent national study of K-12 schools, 68 percent of principals reported that their students participate in community activities that are recognized by the schools, compared to 64 percent in 1999.⁶ Meanwhile, 69 percent of college seniors participated in a service-learning course in 2018,⁷ up from 56 percent in 2010.⁸ While trends show an increasing number of service opportunities offered by schools and universities, there remain far too many who are not accessing these opportunities.

The type of service matters

A growing body of research shows the positive benefits associated with service learning, which is differentiated from volunteering in that there is a balance between thoughtfully structured learning goals and service outcomes.⁹ However, the majority of youth service opportunities are rooted in volunteering rather than service learning, with the percentage of schools offering service learning declining from 32 percent in 1999 to 24 percent in 2008.¹⁰ This disparity in the quality of service opportunities is reflected in the lack of consistency across state education policies. Although 33 states mention community service in their state academic standards or frameworks,¹¹ only 11 states have standards or curriculum frameworks that explicitly incorporate service learning¹² and 11 states have policies that address funding for either service learning or community service.¹³

The equity divide

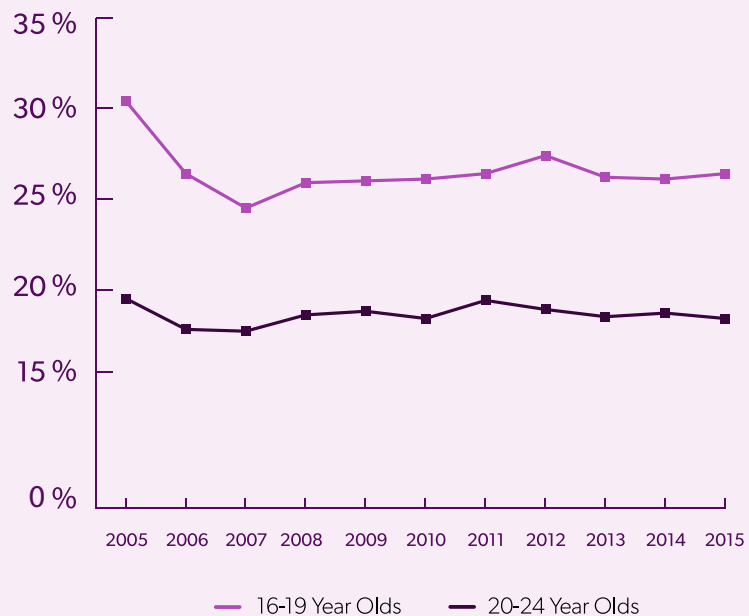
Participation in opportunities for service varies across socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, based on the availability and access to surrounding institutions that facilitate and encourage service.¹⁴ Schools in low-income areas, often serving a larger percentage of minority students, are less likely to offer service learning when compared with other schools (20 percent vs. 27 percent).¹⁵ Moreover, only eight percent of students at low-performing schools report that their school offers service learning.¹⁶

For low-income young adults, in school and in the workforce, monetary and non-monetary costs of service act as a barrier to participation.¹⁷ When considering access to service opportunities, minority groups are underrepresented in higher education,¹⁸ where they might get exposure to service-learning courses. They are also more likely to be disconnected from school and work overall, again missing out on service opportunities.¹⁹ Service programs, like AmeriCorps, aim to expand access to service opportunities by offering a modest living stipend. Even so, the cost of living may still remain a barrier to participation for young adults, in particular young adults from low-income backgrounds. Programs are working to address the financial challenges that may exclude low-income adults from service by offering added financial supports like housing assistance, however, these are not yet widespread.

Afterschool invests in the future of young America by promoting service opportunities for all ages

The Do Good Institute suggests that more accessible, quality opportunities for community engagement are needed for our youth and young adult populations. The flexibility of the afterschool space makes it well placed to offer both service-learning opportunities for youth in afterschool programs and to host young adults in meaningful service positions as afterschool program staff. In this way, afterschool programs help to expand access and availability of service

Figure 1
Volunteering rates by age: 2005-2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 2005-2015

opportunities for our nation's young people, particularly in areas of concentrated poverty and underserved populations. These service initiatives connect youth and young adults to a host of positive development outcomes that are aligned with the learning goals of the regular school day and the expectations of the workplace.

Through service learning in afterschool, youth feel empowered and develop a sense of agency, self-efficacy, and confidence as valuable contributors to the community.²⁰ This positive self-perception manifests in improved social skills, positive attitude toward school and learning,²¹ improved academic outcomes,²² and decreased likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors.²³ Moreover, as service learners, students gain a broader, more varied perspective on their community, compassion for others, and cultural competency.²⁴

Under the guidance of afterschool programs, young adults explore and establish their identities as community members. Grounded on forging strong community ties, service generates a network of support for young adults that promotes trust, community values, and relationships.²⁵ This is reflected in the survey responses of AmeriCorps service year alumni who demonstrated increased civic engagement, higher voter turnout, and increased likelihood of engagement in community issues.²⁶ Additionally, young adults who complete a year of service experience a greater likelihood of bachelor's degree attainment²⁷ and better prospects at full-time employment.²⁸ It is clear that the afterschool space engages youth and young adults in service opportunities that place them on a path toward success.

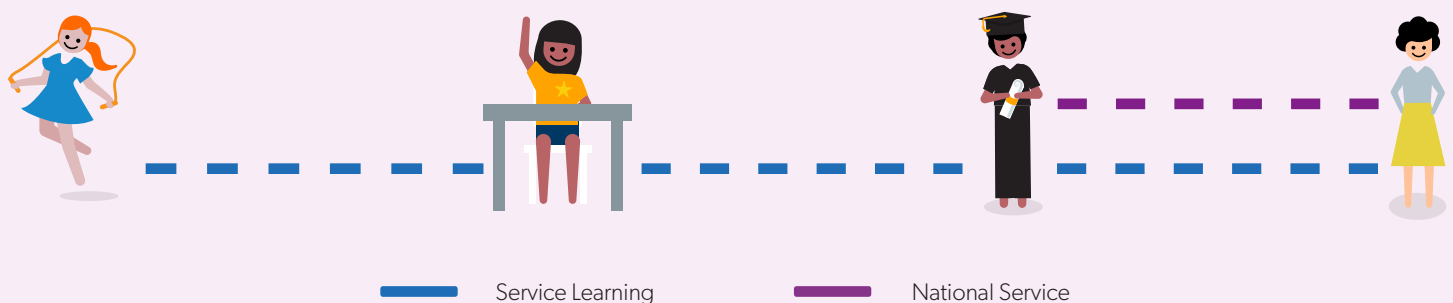
Service Opportunities at Every Age

Everyone, regardless of age, can take part in service. The service opportunity may look different depending on one's age, but the positive benefits are a constant. In addition to meeting the needs of a community, acts of service can foster greater community engagement, trust, a better understanding of the community, and compassion for others.

Service Learning

Through service learning, youth are active participants in thoughtfully organized community projects that advance a set of learning goals while meeting the needs of the community. For example, students in an afterschool program study their city's waste collection and recycling services. Students then plan and implement a series of local cleanup projects to apply their lessons on accessibility and use of these services. In addition to students helping with litter abatement and beautification efforts, the community is presented with students' sustainable waste management recommendations.

Example adapted from [Loyola University](#).



National Service

For young adults, service can also be a deeper form of experiential education through longer-term service projects that provide formative hands-on opportunities to assess and address community needs. For example, AmeriCorps State and National members placed at an afterschool program make a yearlong commitment to directly serve youth and their families. Members grow professionally, learn about the community they are serving, and support students' development. Students in programs benefit from AmeriCorps members' tutoring and mentorship. Afterschool programs benefit by receiving help with child enrichment activities and overall program implementation.

Connecting underrepresented youth and young adults to service

There remains a gap between the number of youth and young adults who want to participate in service and the number who have access to them, and this gap is largest for minorities.²⁹ However, afterschool is well positioned to reach youth and young adults from underserved and underrepresented communities. Out of the 10.2 million children in afterschool programs, minority and low-income youth are more likely than others to participate.³⁰ Service in afterschool programs can also represent a pathway for young adults, particularly for those who missed out on service learning as youth, to reengage with education, develop their social networks, and participate in workforce training and skill development.³¹ In this way, afterschool is working toward building the next generation of diverse leadership.

Service for school-age youth

The **Einstein Enrichment Program (EEP)** opens up opportunities for minority and economically-disadvantaged high school students in the Bronx to explore and excel in the sciences through service-learning projects. Students meet twice a week after school to engage in hands-on learning experiences that include ambulance bay prep, professional seminars, and academic enrichment classes. Through the Julie Cruz Teen Action Program, EEP students integrate what they're learning with service opportunities that address community health disparities. Students spearhead service-learning projects that use a practical application of medical or health research to benefit their communities. These service-learning experiences create a pathway for students historically underrepresented in the medical and scientific professions to pursue these types of careers.

Service for young adults

Breakthrough Cincinnati attracts a diverse body of college undergraduates to serve as teaching fellows in a summer learning program for underserved middle school students. Teaching fellows begin their service experience with a pre-service training program tailored to equip young adults with the tools necessary to facilitate a summer learning program. With ongoing support from program staff, teaching fellows lead culturally relevant academic and enrichment sessions. Breakthrough Cincinnati is intentional about diversity and inclusion in their recruitment of teaching fellows—understanding that young adults who share similar racial, ethnic, or socio-economic backgrounds as the students they serve can make a unique and valuable contribution to student success. At the same time, these inclusive practices increase the number of traditionally underrepresented minorities in the field of education.

Enhancing future prospects through foundational skills and competencies

Opportunities for service in the afterschool space help youth and young adults develop the skills and experiences that are valued in school and in the workplace.³² For example, a majority of college admissions staff agrees that community service is highly regarded and has a positive impact on the chance of acceptance.³³ Employers also value service as preparation for work. In a survey of human resource executives, 82 percent said that they would be more likely to choose a candidate with volunteer experience on their resume because it advances communication skills, plays a key role in developing strong character, and improves leadership skills.³⁴

Service for school-age youth

Civic Nebraska champions authentic service learning as a transformative skill-building experience for youth. As part of Civic Nebraska's broader mission to create a modern and robust democracy, the Youth Civic Leadership afterschool program encourages elementary and middle school students to invest in their communities



National Service Members in Afterschool

AmeriCorps is a network of national service programs that engage adults of all ages in a range of meaningful service opportunities. Young adults interested in direct service opportunities can participate in AmeriCorps State and National programs. These service members address critical community needs in focus areas such as education, by carrying out service projects that often involve face-to-face interactions with community members like mentoring, teaching, tutoring, or afterschool program implementation.

AmeriCorps VISTA offers young adults the opportunity to help bring communities out of poverty through indirect service. VISTA members embark on capacity-building endeavors such as fundraising, volunteer management, asset mapping, or community outreach. All AmeriCorps members live at the poverty level as they learn about and address critical community needs.

Afterschool programs support the growth of service opportunities for young adults by hosting both AmeriCorps State and National and AmeriCorps VISTA members at their sites. For example, State Afterschool Networks across the country offer a variety of service-year experiences for young adults (See OregonASK Afterschool Spotlight). Meanwhile, in relation to afterschool, organizations like [Service Year Alliance](#) help to promote service opportunities and increase the number of national service members placed in afterschool programs.



by way of service learning. Program leaders incorporate best practices for service learning by aligning service-learning initiatives during the afterschool program with school curricula and state standards. The program also promotes hands-on youth-driven service-learning projects to reinforce youth voice. By encouraging youth to take initiative, collaborate with partners, critically think through issues, and make educated decisions about how to solve community problems, Civic Nebraska's afterschool service-learning program builds confident civic leaders with strong academic and employment skills.

Service for young adults

OregonASK—a statewide afterschool network that works to expand access to quality out-of-school time programs through partnerships, policy, and professional development—prepares its AmeriCorps VISTA members for full-time employment.* Young adults who participate in a year of service at OregonASK lead projects that help strengthen the capacity of afterschool programs while engaging in a rewarding professional development experience. VISTA members acquire in-demand skills such as cooperation, entrepreneurship, persistence in the face of difficulty, and the ability to handle unexpected events. Recognizing the valuable growth and development that accompanies a service year, OregonASK has hired several of its former VISTA members as full-time staff.

Creating an avenue for career exploration

Afterschool programs expand the horizons of youth and young adults by introducing them to a wide variety of topic areas through service projects. For youth, studies have shown that students who engage in service learning increase awareness of career possibilities and develop more positive workplace attitudes than other students.³⁵ Among young adults, service projects can spark interest in fields of work that they may have never considered before, or attract young people to high-need but hard-to-fill jobs in fields like education, that are facing shortages. For example, AmeriCorps service-year alumni are more likely than their peers to work in education, and community and social service occupations.³⁶

Service for school-age youth

In high school, service-learning opportunities can help youth contemplate their career interests and expand their career horizons to more outward-focusing careers.³⁷ Health360 provides a structured service-learning program called **Youth Health Service Corps (YHSC)** for underrepresented high school students in northwestern Connecticut. Through a five-module curriculum, designed for use in either an in

*See the *National Service Members in Afterschool* sidebar on page 4 for more information on AmeriCorps VISTA.

K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice

The following set of evidence-based standards were developed by the [National Youth Leadership Council](https://www.nylc.org) (NYLC) to help K-12 practitioners ensure high-quality service-learning practice. For more information, visit www.nylc.org/standards.

- ▶ **Meaningful Service:** Engages participants in meaningful and personally-relevant service activities.
- ▶ **Link to Curriculum:** Intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.
- ▶ **Reflection:** Incorporates multiple ongoing and challenging reflection activities that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society.
- ▶ **Diversity:** Promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.
- ▶ **Youth Voice:** Provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.
- ▶ **Partnerships:** Collaborative and mutually beneficial partnerships that address community needs.
- ▶ **Progress Monitoring:** Engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals, and uses results for improvement and sustainability.
- ▶ **Duration and Intensity:** Sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes.

Visit the NYLC website [Lift: Raising the Bar for Service-Learning Practice](https://www.nylc.org) to see these standards in practice.

school or afterschool setting, students discuss critical topics such as leadership, social determinants of health, cultural competency, and ethics. Students use these lessons to increase their knowledge of community health disparities and apply what they have learned to better the community. Participation in YHSC strengthens student involvement in the community, sparks interest in health care fields, and molds future health care professionals.

Service for young adults

Service also has significant impacts on employment and career pathways of young adults. **City Year** offers young adults the opportunity to explore a career in education by means of a year of national service in the nation's highest-need urban schools. City Year AmeriCorps members receive extensive youth development training and in turn provide comprehensive support to students, including leading a dynamic afterschool program. In a survey of alumni, 94 percent agreed that their City Year experience had a significantly positive impact on their lives.³⁸ In a longitudinal survey, 76 percent of alumni said that the program influenced their choice of work or career path.³⁹

Conclusion

Engaging in service advances the success of youth and young adults by helping them achieve academic, social, and professional growth. However, the potential realization of these positive outcomes relies on the ability of youth and young adults to access and engage in service opportunities. Ensuring the availability of quality service opportunities requires the support of all education and community stakeholders. As a valuable link to service opportunities, afterschool programs are a crucial part of this effort to invest in the future of America's young people.



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