Does Service Increase Civic Skills?

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The Making of a Good Samaritan
Can you take a non-civic-minded teen and turn him into a do-gooder?
According to a recent study in the journal Political Psychology, its possible. Researchers at the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C., studied two groups of Boston-area students at a high school that instituted a community service requirement for graduation.

One set of kids graduated just before the requirement was in place. A second cohort graduated one or two years after the new policy was enacted. The study found teenagers who were already community-minded were unaffected by the new mandate. But the more self-interested teenagers tended to develop a willingness to donate their time to charity as well as a greater political awareness.

The study is one of the first to prove that community service-required by 25 percent of U.S. public high schools- foster civic engagement. -Nikhil Swaminathan

Longitudinal Gains in Civic Development through School-Based Required Service
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Despite recent figures indicating that 26% of public high schools in the United States require student involvement in community service or service learning, there is little empirical evidence to support such policies. In the present study, successive cohorts of high school students, one without (n = 174) and two with a community service requirement (n = 312), were compared longitudinally on measures of civic attitudes and behaviors. Each cohort was divided according to individual students' inclinations to serve voluntarily. Students already inclined to serve scored high on all measures throughout and showed no advantage after meeting the requirement. However, students who were less inclined to serve showed marked gains on three of four civic measures after completing their requirement. Whereas, they scored as low as their less-inclined counterparts who had no requirement during grade 11, they differed from their counterparts after serving the mandated 40 hours during grade 12. The quasi-natural experiment provides support for the argument that a well-designed service program can have a clear benefit in civic development for non self-selected youth.

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