



**Community Service in Senior Culminating Projects:
An Exploratory Study**

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December, 2003

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the fall of 2007, Washington State high school students will be required to complete a culminating project as part of their graduation requirements. In the 2002/2003 school year, when this study was researched, individual schools were developing their own requirements for their prospective graduates, and many of these schools were considering integrating community service in some form into senior requirements. This exploratory study was conducted to identify issues that may help students become engaged meaningfully in their communities as part of culminating projects. The information obtained from this preliminary research will allow a more refined study to be conducted in the future.

This study was conducted in four high schools in Southwest Washington implementing culminating projects for their seniors. Community service was a requirement in one of these schools and it was supported in the other three. Interviews were conducted with 54 seniors during nine recorded focus groups conducted at the four schools. In addition to the focus groups, written surveys were conducted with 195 seniors in two of the schools that encourage, but do not require, community service as part of their culminating projects.

Focus group and survey questions were designed to inform those promoting community service as a strategy to enhance student learning while strengthening ties between emerging adults and their communities. Of the survey respondents, 69 (35.4%) of the students were identified as having engaged in some level of service while completing their projects. Responses from these students and from the comments obtained in the focus groups provide the bases for this report.

Students who chose to complete service as part of their culminating projects listed positive benefits. These enhancements included:

- Improved learning in topic areas
- Increased learning about career interests
- Stronger feelings of connection to the community

Students also gave statements indicating the following benefits may be accruing from the service portion of their culminating projects:

- Increased opportunities for leadership
- Improved self esteem
- Increased enjoyment of their projects
- Increased learning about citizenship

Further research is needed to identify how much the service component contributed to student growth while completing these integrated projects.

Students confronted challenges in developing their culminating projects. The challenge most frequently identified by students was finding a mentor. The majority of students, both those who completed community service and those who did not, stated they developed their projects with the help of a mentor, but that locating those mentors was difficult. Only a small number of students indicated their teachers or school advisors were helpful in developing these projects or in locating a mentor. Over half of the students who had mentors relied on acquaintances to mentor and guide them in meeting this graduation requirement.

Attempts to influence student activities during their senior projects will be most effective if they help students and teachers in practical ways such as:

- Identifying a broad pool of community mentors and organizations willing to help students succeed in the requirements of their projects, and
- Finding practical strategies that help teachers connect their students, especially those with limited community connections, with community resources for developing their projects.

Further research into the processes of developing community service as an enhancement for senior projects is indicated in the following areas:

- What practical supports for community connections can be provided to teachers and students, and which of these supports are most effective?
- To what degree does the service component of a senior project lead to the preliminary benefits identified in this study, and do these benefits accrue regardless of whether or not service is a component of the project?
- Does requiring a service component to a senior project enhance or detract from the potential benefits of such service for the students?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Kate McPherson, Director of Project Service Leadership; Ed Vidinghoff, of Vidinghoff Photography; and the staff and students of Camas, Hudson's Bay, Ridgefield, and Washougal high schools for their cooperation and assistance.

INTRODUCTION

As part of broader school reform efforts begun in 1993, Washington State has adopted a new graduation requirement for high school students that will take effect in 2008. The graduating class of 2008 will be required to complete a “culminating project” in order to receive a diploma. The legislation defining the new requirements states:

Each student shall complete a culminating project for graduation. The project consists of the student demonstrating both their learning competencies and preparations related to learning goals three [to think critically and link experience and knowledge for problem solving] and four [to understand the importance of work]. Each district shall define the process to implement this graduation requirement, including assessment criteria, in written district policy.
Statutory Authority: RCW [28A.230.090](#). 01-13-114, § 180-51-061, filed 6/20/01, effective 7/21/01; 00-23-032, § 180-51-061, filed 11/8/00, effective 12/9/00.

Many schools have already begun implementing culminating projects for their seniors. Because each district defines their process individually, requirements can and do vary between schools. The schools in this study have integrated community service to varying degrees into their senior culminating projects.

The Community, Higher Education, School Partnership (CHESP) initiative is a service learning project funded by the Corporation of National and Community Service and awarded to Evergreen School District by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in the 2001/2002 school year. Under this initiative, Evergreen School District, in partnership with the Project Service Leadership, undertook a preliminary review of the experiences of graduating seniors in Southwest Washington, especially those who included community service in their senior culminating projects. They sought to learn what students found helpful and rewarding as they chose to incorporate service in their senior projects and what was frustrating and fruitless about the experience.

The schools in this study represent a variety of approaches to culminating projects and community service. Camas, Washougal and Vancouver School Districts include community service as an option; Ridgefield requires all students to complete 20 hours of service related to their project topic.

METHODOLOGY

Student surveys were developed to collect data for this report. Surveys were delivered to four Southwest Washington high schools; Camas High School, Washougal High School, Hudson's Bay High School, and Ridgefield High School; with sufficient copies for all graduating seniors. Because of unavoidable and unexpected competing demands on teachers and students, they were returned from only two of the schools, Camas and Washougal. These schools encouraged but did not require service as part of senior projects. A total of 194 surveys were returned: Washougal returned 92 and Camas returned 102.

The surveys collected both quantitative and qualitative data through open-ended response and Likert-type response questions. Researchers analyzed the open-ended responses for themes and compared these themes with those emerging out of focus groups the researchers conducted with these and other students. Each survey was coded according to whether or not the project included a service component.

Service was defined as unpaid activities which addressed community needs and which benefited people other than the student. Service learning, which places an emphasis on integrating service experiences into student learning, was not distinguished from general service. In other words, those experiences that were service, but not necessarily service learning, were counted as community service. The literature on community service has much to say about distinctions between "service learning" and "service," and it may be useful to integrate this distinction into future study and practice. In one study school, the relevant requirement is for a "physical project" to be completed by the student, and these projects may, or may not, involve community service.

Data for this report also came from nine student focus groups conducted at four high schools; (Camas, Washougal, Hudson's Bay, and Ridgefield). Focus groups included students who had and those who had not conducted service as part of their senior projects. The number of students in these groups ranged from 3-10, and a total of 46 students participated.

The authors developed focus group agenda that corresponded to the themes and questions in the survey. During the focus group meetings, the researchers listened for

emerging themes and concepts to help refine and direct subsequent questions and sessions. The meetings were audio taped and the tapes transcribed. Researchers coded and analyzed the transcripts and compared these results with the survey findings.

FINDINGS

Researchers coding student descriptions of their projects found that a little over one-third of student projects included a community service component. As shown in Table 1, a somewhat higher percentage of students at Washougal High School fit the criteria of community service than those at Camas High School.

**Table 1
Students Conducting Community Service**

School	Students who did a Service Project	Students who did <i>NOT</i> do a Service Project
Washougal	36 (39.1%)	56 (60.9%)
Camas	33 (32.4%)	69 (67.6%)
TOTAL	69 (35.6%)	125 (64.4%)

Types of community service projects undertaken by seniors

Students were asked on the survey, whether the physical component of their senior project involved volunteering, creating a product, job shadowing, participating in a project, working on an event, or “other.” Among the students who were coded as doing community service, 62% said they had volunteered, 23% engaged in a project of some kind, and 16% created a product. When asked to identify the kind of service they performed among survey choices, about one third of the students said their service was on behalf of children.

**Table 2
Type of Service Performed**

Service Performed	Number of Student Responses	% of Student Responses	Service Performed	Number of Student Responses	% of Student Responses
Children	24	34.8%	Homeless	4	5.8%
Health	17	24.6%	Environment	3	4.3%
Disabilities	9	13.0%	Human Rights	2	2.9%
Animals	8	11.6%	Politics	2	2.9%
Sports/Recreation	4	5.8%	International Affairs	0	0%

“Other” topics listed included: working with the elderly, veterans issues, construction projects, business, computers and technical projects such as website design, creative or artistic projects such as informational films, and music projects such as teaching music to children.

Students gave the following responses when asked to name their project in an open-ended response:

- CHEMICALLY DEPENDENT BABIES
- IN-HOME HEALTH CARE
- ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY
- VOLUNTEERING IN ASSISTED LIVING
- SUBSTANCE ABUSE
- COSMETOLOGY
- FELINE CARE (VOLUNTEER AND PAMPHLET)
- ANIMAL CONTROL
- VOLUNTEER AT DAYCARE
- ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY
- REFLEXOLOGY
- FEEDING THE HOMELESS
- DOWN’S SYNDROME
- FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME
- BASIC ANIMAL CARE
- AUTOMOBILE EMISSIONS AND POLLUTION
- CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT/TEACHING
- YEARBOOK DESIGN
- WILDERNESS SURVIVAL
- VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN/WOMEN’S SELF DEFENSE
- DUTIES AND QUALIFICATIONS OF AN ATTORNEY/VIDEO OF LEGAL PROCEDURES
- WEB PAGE DESIGN
- THE ART OF ARNIS
- LEARNING STYLES/TUTORING
- REBUILDING A FOOT BRIDGE
- BUILDING KAYAKS
- CHILD DEVELOPMENT: CHARACTERISTICS OF A FIRST GRADER
- WOODWORKING (BUILT A BED)
- HOW SELF PERCEPTION AND OTHERS’ PERCEPTIONS EFFECT ONE’S SELF ESTEEM
- NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS
- TEACHING LITTLE KIDS
- MANAGING A MAJOR SPORTING EVENT
- VETERAN MEMORIAL CONSTRUCTION
- RECONNECTIVE HEALING
- VOLUNTEERING WITH THE ELDERLY

In the focus groups, the most commonly described areas of student community work were health issues, arts-based projects, and working with children. Students involved in health care issues described projects such as volunteering at hospitals or clinics, often combined with work to increase public awareness of a health issue. Students working with children happened primarily in the classroom, although students also volunteered at organizations such as the Boy Scouts. One student described how she connected her research paper and volunteer work:

I talked about the different factors that effect children’s academic success. I tried to prove that parental involvement was the most important. I tutored in a classroom and I did a play with a group of fourth graders trying to get parents involved in that activity. It was an after school thing that the kids did with me.

Projects working with the elderly were popular among the “other” fields of volunteering. One of five students who did work with the elderly described her project:

For my research paper I did the stereotyping on the elderly and lack of health care benefits at the elderly place. For my senior project I worked with residents at Mountain View House. My main goal was I wanted to merge the gap between the youth and the elderly. That would be breaking down some of the stereotypes. I became an activity coordinator and I did a lot of activities that involved both youth and elderly together. . . The senior prom involved both youth and the residents of Mountain View House, along with their families and what I did was do invitations to the families and for the students there were all welcome to come. There was a live DJ and they danced. It was very successful.

Value added to culminating projects by community service

Many students reported that a community service component enriched their culminating project experience. Following are the areas of benefit students discussed.

Improved learning in their topic areas

Many students said that their service hours allowed them to supplement or better absorb the learning they gained from the research and writing components of their culminating projects, as these statements show:

I feel that I learned more from doing my service hours than writing my paper. When I got to interact with people that were victims of domestic violence I learned that it is a serious thing that go on in these peoples lives. I learned how grateful I am, and thankful for the things I have in life. That is what enabled me to learn more about domestic violence.

I felt I benefited more from my project and not really my paper. The project hours got you more involved with people and made me learn more about myself and

other people. With the paper it was just writing another paper. I did not learn much from writing the paper.

I feel that the project hours are really rewarding. Depending on what you are doing, you learn a lot. I worked with kids; it was really rewarding to see the impact I had on them. Since I did it at the Boys and Girls Club I was trying to teach them positive behavior, and it was rewarding to see them happy and interacting with people in a positive way.

By doing the teaching it made me think about the techniques that I learned. Teaching forced me to break the techniques down. I had to figure out how to teach what I learned. The teaching really helped me understand the techniques better by teaching others.

Learning more about career interests

A little over half (53.6%) of students who completed service “agreed very much” or “agreed” with the statement: “my community involvement project helped me gain a greater understanding of my career interests.” Students in focus groups also commented on this area of learning and described what they had learned about their career interests:

I have always been interested in the political world. Government is my favorite subject. I want to minor in political science. I know that when I get out of college I do not want a job in the political world, but I would love to campaign. I think that doing this project has helped me to see that more. Before I was not sure. Now I cannot wait to do it. Maybe when I am older I will try to run for office.

It helped me view the way nurses and doctors actually work. I got to see their environment and how they reacted to different things going on.

For me a positive thing that came out of this was that it did help me decide what I want to become in the future. It helped me that way.

People were most frequently cited by students as the way in which community involvement helped them focus their career interest, either through exposure to people working in the field or to their lifestyles. Almost 50% of students said that people working in the field had helped them focus their career interests.

Stronger connections to the community

When asked to indicate whether they agreed with the statement that “as a result of my senior project I have learned more about an issue that impacts the people in our community” on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being “agree very much” and 5 being “disagree very much”) students who conducted community service agreed more strongly (a mean

score of 2.6) compared with those who did not do community service (a mean score of 3.4). In focus groups, students reflected positively on the ways in which their project involved them in the community:

I think that doing the senior project will make me participate more in the community. I did not really participate in the community a lot, because I did not have time. Now I find time for community service. I worked at a daycare for my hours and now I sneak back there to see the kids.

Knowing that I have helped others out, made it a worth while experience. This experience had made me feel more comfortable going out into the community. If I was ever going to teach again this past experience will make me more prepared.

I went around and handed out flyers in the low-income community. That impacted me quite a bit to see some of the looks on their faces when I would come to the door with this free offer that they would otherwise not be able to afford.

Expanded opportunities for leadership

Some student comments indicate that community service may have increased their opportunity or propensity to demonstrate leadership:

It made me a better leader, before I did not have any leadership skills and it just helped me a lot.

I learned so much and met some interesting people. I learned what the media coordinator at [agency] does. I was on the front page of the [local paper] and on TV three times.

Improved self esteem

Students made comments that indicated they experienced an improved sense of self worth through their volunteer experiences, for example:

It gives you a feeling of self worth. It either helps you to appreciate what you have in your life or to relate.

I got lots of compliments that made me feel really good.

Increased enjoyment of projects

For many students, their community service experiences added elements of enjoyment and even fun to their culminating projects, and they mentioned this in both focus groups and on surveys:

The project hours I learned the most from. I learned to just have fun because in coaching a team you have a great time and you learn to be a kid and get along with kids. The life lesson that I learned was it is okay to just have fun and be a kid sometimes.

I learned from my project communication skills with working with kids and the staff. I really enjoyed my project, mostly because it was a community service.

I had a lot of fun doing my project. I didn't like all the work, but I know it will help me in the long run.

It was a very fun and a good learning experience.

I thought the community service made my project a lot more fun.

Considering that enjoyment can be a powerful motivation for learning, this is not an issue to take lightly.

Improved satisfaction with senior projects

Students who integrated community service in their culminating projects voiced fewer complaints than those who did not, and the complaints they did voice were less bitter. Students who were involved in community service voiced complaints about the senior project with comments such as, "This project was extremely stressful, and we didn't have enough time, everything was so stressed together," but overall, their complaints were more tempered than those who did not do community service. Complaints among community service participants often separated their assessment of senior projects from their community service experience:

Although Senior Projects seemed difficult and a waste of time, I'm very glad for the experiences that I had while doing this. I would recommend anyone to volunteer at the Humane Society they always need more help.

Another student recommended retaining the community service component and saw the paper as a waste of time:

Senior projects are a waste of time! You spend 12 years at high school and it all comes down to one project. It's a waste of time and busywork. I think it should turn into a community service project, with no paper. Just volunteer somewhere and present it to your class.

These are in contrast to the complaint of students who had did not do community service, which tended to give blanket criticism of the senior project:

This just seems like a busy-work project for students who are already busy enough.

It was very boring and was all a bunch of jumping through hoops.

Senior projects are worthless.

Senior projects are stupid!!

It is difficult to make conclusions about the extent to which community service increases student appreciation for their senior projects, as it is likely that students who are already likely to be supportive of school projects in the first place would be more inclined to undertake community service. However, it is worth examining whether community service can help give students more belief in the relevancy of their projects.

Increased learning about citizenship

Learning about citizenship was not a subject deeply developed by students in their comments about their community service projects. However, initial comments indicate this may be an area of student learning which directed community service could enhance:

It helped me understand. I use to walk down the hall and say that person is hypercritical, that person is on drugs, but now I am not like that anymore. I am more open. It made me realize that people cannot be so harsh against people they do not know. Going to the rehab centers you see how some people are really struggling. It made me realize that not everybody has a perfect life. A citizen needs to be more aware of their surroundings and not so judgmental. Going through high school you can see how people are. I am glad I could see the real world.

Time management challenges and skills

When students were asked in an open-ended response to list the three most important things they learned in their senior project, the most common response after some aspect of learning in their topic area was time management. Time management arose in focus groups as both a challenge and an area of learning:

The main obstacle for me was trying to balance everything. I have a job and I have to do school [and] I am trying to work at the preschool classroom. To overcome that, I arranged a schedule where I would just come in for an hour everyday. When I got in a routine of going there it became really easy.

Factors assisting students in developing their culminating projects

Students were asked how they had developed their culminating projects. The majority (52.1%) of students, both those who engaged in community service and those who had not, developed their projects with the help of a mentor; 11.3% built on prior experiences; and 8.2% worked with their parents. Only 5.8% of students who engaged in community service reported developing their project with the help of their teachers or advisors, and

this percentage dropped to less than 1 percent among students who had not engaged in community service.

Students reported that their mentors were very important to the success of their culminating projects. As one student put it:

I think the most important thing is finding a mentor. That person is going to give you the best hands-on knowledge. What you get through books is not going to give you the information that a person can give you . . . Finding someone that knows his or her field is the best way to get support.

Given the central role that mentors played in developing student projects, the ways in which students found their mentors is an important factor in the culminating project process. The majority of students (52.3%) reported that their mentor was an acquaintance; 20.5% reported finding their mentor through parents or relations. As with the process of developing projects, teacher influence in finding mentors was low: only 12.8% of students reported that their teachers helped them with this process.

Challenges faced by students in completing community service projects

Following are the challenges students cited most often in the process of completing their community service.

Difficulty finding a mentor, project or agency with which to work

Some students reported difficulty finding a good mentor and suggested that schools could do more to help in this area:

I thought it would have been helpful if the advisor would have helped you to find a mentor. My advisor was not helpful. It was hard for me to find a mentor, because I did not know what kind of community service to do with skateboarding.

The hours are not really a problem but I think it is harder to find a mentor. There needs to be an easier way to find a mentor who knows more about your topic and the senior project. It is really hard to have your project hours and the project rely on you mentors signature. In my experience, my mentor wanted me to do one thing when I wanted to do something else and therefore he did not sign off on my hours. I spent a month trying to get my diploma. There was a lot of complications because of my mentor and the lack of connection there. My advice is the school needs to do more with helping in finding supportive mentors, some are flaky. Because the mentor did not sign off, that meant I could not do the boards. I know other situations that were similar to mine.

Another student suggested that school resources for identifying mentors could be improved:

Suggestion I have for the future projects is mainly finding a mentor that can assist you in exactly what your doing for your paper and service hours. With my paper, the advancement of sound technology, it is hard to have someone help you with it because it is so specialized. I had to find someone who did it for a living. Have teachers help students find mentors that match their topics. There is a handout for mentors that are called the mentor confirmation and it basically tell the students what is expected of them. It is not very detailed or helpful.

For some students, finding the opportunity to volunteer was difficult. One student said she ran into the issue of confidentiality in her chosen field:

Some obstacles I had at first were for my hours I really wanted to go out in the community and feel like I was helping someone. But, when I called rehab places they would not take volunteers for confidential reasons.

Timing and procrastination

Some students felt that the timing of the culminating projects was problematic as it conflicted with activities such as completing college applications:

Although the senior project is very helpful not only to us, but also our community, the stress at the end of the year is overwhelming. My only suggestion is that the project should be done more at the beginning of the year.

This project was extremely stressful, and we didn't have enough time, everything was so stressed together.

Several students commented that the last semester of senior year was an already stressful time for them, and that conducting community service during this period was difficult because of time commitments:

I think it would be better to have a junior project, instead of a senior project, because as seniors we have so much do with applying for colleges and scholarships. Prior to my senior year I did not have much to work on.

We have so much to worry about in our senior year. It is overwhelming.

Others admitted that their own tendency to procrastinate had been their challenge:

I had no idea what I was going to do for my senior project until the days the hours were due. ... I am really lazy. It was not that hard. I just procrastinated. We were allowed to change our project topic a couple of times. I had like three different topics.

Making connections between research topics and physical activities

Some students in focus groups, including those not conducting community service, mentioned difficulty in making connections between their research topic and their “physical project.”

Sometimes it was hard to make a direct connection between your project hours and your paper. That is part of what we were supposed to have done for this entire project. For me, mine was on music censorship, but I could not think of a way to connect. Mine involved a lot about legislation, but I could not think of how to tangibly do my hours in relation to that. I had to go with playing music, which is not really related to my project. I think a lot of people had the same problems.

Inconsistent or unclear directions

Several students complained about inconsistent and incomplete directions given to them by teachers and at schools:

The senior project was very disorganized. There were changes in the formats every day. The way we were told to do our speech changed the day we started practice panels. Teachers didn't agree with each other. Due dates were different in all the classes. We are all seniors and should have equal time to work on projects. No one should get more time to work on their project.

One student was confused by the variety of expectations among different schools:

I was personally very confused about it, because all the different schools were doing different things for their project part. I have a lot of friends at different schools and was confused why we were not doing the same thing. I found out at the end of my project that the project hours . . . did not have to be community service. I am not sure if that is true or not, but that would have helped a lot of people. I think they were really unclear about how they set this up and how they explained it to us. I know a lot of people had a lot of questions and were confused about it.

Some students said that their teachers were not well informed about expectations:

Our teacher, she just kind of gave us the forms and she talked about it. There was a senior meeting that we all went too. It was a huge packet of forms that they gave us. I know several people lost those packets. They gave it to us in like October, and so many people lost the forms. If we had questions we went to our CWP teacher. I think this was her first time doing senior projects. She found it difficult a lot of times to answer our questions, so she would have to run to other teachers.

This complaint was particularly bitter when it came to grading expectations:

I feel that the school did not structure the senior project at all. We basically had a timeline to complete our work, and we were not informed on what it was to look like or how to do the work. We did not know what the judges would be looking for, what the readers of our senior papers would be looking for.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ADVICE FROM GRADUATING SENIORS TO FUTURE SENIORS

Students were asked to give advice to the seniors who followed them. The following comments are typical of the advice most frequently given.

Do not procrastinate

One thing I would recommend for next years seniors are try to start early and do not procrastinate. The paper takes a lot longer than you at first think. We had to use new writing styles, so that takes time to understand. Also, work with your teachers because they can offer support and help. For the physical project I would recommend thinking of ideas before hand and get others input

Choose a topic about which you are passionate

I think people need to choose topics that they are really passionate about . . . When you have your speech and your passionate about it, it is much easier for you to do well on it. Do not choose the easy way out. You will end up having a tougher time doing the project.

You have to choose a topic that you like. It will help you out more and you will like your project more. Especially when you do your presentation, you will have a better understanding on your project if you do something that you like.

IMPLICATIONS OF STUDENT OBSERVATIONS FOR DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

This preliminary survey of student comments, opinions and feelings about their senior culminating projects, while not definitively conclusive, does clearly indicate areas for consideration and future study. Following are recommendations based on areas of concern expressed by students.

Improve the integration of service or other physical projects with academic activities

Schools should seek ways to help students make connections between their academic work and their service projects, whether in culminating projects or the classroom. One of the most common complaints voiced by students both in focus groups and in open-ended comments on the survey forms was the lack of relevance of their senior projects, particularly their physical projects, to their other studies. "Senior projects are a waste of time" was a response given in various words thirteen times on surveys. Some students felt their time would have been better spent working on academic or classroom projects or completing college applications. If students can clearly see connections between their projects and their other studies, they may resent them less and gain from them more.

Provide consistent guidelines and instructions for students

Schools should distribute clearly stated, written policies to teachers and students and enforce them as consistently as possible.

Provide resources for students to make connections to mentors and other resources

Students specifically requested resources for connecting with mentors and projects. Given the importance they placed on good mentoring, this request is logical. One difficulty with projects outside the classroom is that students may have unequal access to resources depending on their backgrounds. It seems unlikely that schools would intentionally create a set of requirements that represent an opportunity only to those students who already have advantages. One student advised that other students not undertake community projects unless they had "connections." "Unless they have connections and have a feeling to do that sort of thing, I highly recommend not pushing a community activity." In order to help all students "stretch" (as one high school describes it) it is advisable to provide resources for students to make new connections. These resources should focus on providing connections to mentors and other resources to facilitate students culminating projects.

When asked what resources could help students find a meaningful community involvement activity, students responded positively to the following possibilities, listed here in order of most popular among students:

- A website giving senior project possibilities and resources (37.4%)
- A list of local community agencies and contact people (31.8%)
- The opportunity to work with other students in the same area (30.8%)

Carefully consider limiting choices and requiring community service activities.

Both students who were, and who were not, required to do service indicated they thought it was a bad idea to place any restrictions on students' ability to choose their projects. Students may agree more readily with integrating community service into all culminating projects if they are able to see connections to their areas of interest and are convinced of its relevancy to their learning:

I agree with the idea of community service, but not with the senior project, because it strikes a dilemma with having to do a project that you want to do, rather than just doing because it has to be done. By having community service

mandatory it narrows that avenue. Community service is a great thing. I do not think it should be mandatory with the senior project.

Overall, students resented any kind of restrictions on their choice in completing the senior project. Choice was an issue mentioned by 11 of the 118 students who chose to write comments.

However, it is also possible that authentic community service could help improve seniors' sense that the projects they conduct are more than, in the words of one angry senior, "a waste of time and busywork." The same student recommended that the senior projects consist *only* of community service and a presentation.

This is an area for further study and we recommended more comparative work between students at schools that require service learning and those that require it.

Study the timing of projects

One question to pose is whether changing the timing of the service or other physical project and the research papers can create a more integrated senior project. In many cases, the paper was submitted before the project hours were completed, meaning that students may not have had a chance to process the learning they gained in their field experiences. On the other hand, some students reported that doing their community service after they wrote their paper gave them a chance to absorb their new academic knowledge more deeply. This is a question for further study.

CONCLUSION

Three principles regarding student attitudes that experienced educators have come to know through their teaching are:

- 1) Whenever students are required to complete work they do not consider to be worthwhile or relevant to their learning, the students may become disenchanted.
- 2) Students required to do challenging work without a clear understanding of the criteria for success and without adequate support may be frustrated.

- 3) Students who observe what they consider as inequities between their own rigorous learning requirements and less rigorous requirements expected of others may be resentful.

The preliminary research described in this report illustrates that valuable connections can be made between students and their community through service conducted as part of culminating projects. However, if the rationale for specific service requirements, and the standards of performance are not made clear, the requirement for service may result in a perfunctory experience that does not enhance student learning or build a positive connection to the community.

As school districts begin and refine the process of adopting culminating projects adequate staff or volunteer support must be allocated to insure each student has opportunities for success. Many of the students interviewed relied upon parents and family contacts to obtain the connections and mentoring necessary to complete their projects. Many senior students lack family members with the time and capability to provide the connections and support their students may need to be successful. If students are to be successful in learning from community mentors, strong school planning is needed to connect all students with capable mentors in order to provide an equitable learning experience for all students.