



## John Stehle MPIA-SIS, '07

### *"Service Learning Cost-Benefit Analytics"*


Multiple opportunities to turn specialized interests into practical, plan-of-action proposals are tangible advantages to a graduate-level education. Jonathan Stehle, a Master of Public and International Affairs-Security and Intelligence Studies major at the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, is actively studying the advantages of service learning from a cost-benefit analysis perspective. Moreover, he's gotten approval to submit his recommendations and findings to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) on a regular basis.

Stehle participated in an intensive internship in Washington D.C. during the summer of 2006. He held a paid fellowship position at the CNCS, where he aided the organization in preparing its budget submission for the Office of Management and Budget. The CNCS is allotted a specific amount of federal funding each year to carry out its aims, which include providing financial support to well-known service-learning organizations such as Learn and Serve America, AmeriCorps, and SeniorCorps.

One stumbling block in studying the efficacy of service learning is that most data gathering yields results that are qualitative, and often, largely anecdotal. Typical research queries — including defining service learning's role in promoting good citizenship; identifying with one's community; acquiring useful skills that transfer to the workplace; and fostering a desire to continue learning beyond the volunteer experience — are often difficult to explore numerically. Stehle is especially interested in discovering the precise connection between service-learning participation and high-school graduation rates, as well as the degree to which service learning enables students to raise their scores on standardized tests.

When Stehle's D.C. fellowship ended, he wanted to continue exploring the issue of quantitatively measuring the benefits of service learning. At GSPiA, he turned to [Dr. Siddharth Chandra](#). "Dr. Chandra is a very approachable person, without question," says Stehle. "Actually, the thing that really excites me [at GSPiA] is that [the] professors here — if you show them that you're willing to work — they will work with you. The word 'no' is something I've never heard yet at GSPiA."

The immediate benefits of service learning, Stehle says, though in the nascent stages of being quantitatively documented, are very tangible. He elaborated on a common example: high school or college students volunteering to clean up a polluted stream in their community. Such a project would teach students how to write a proposal of action, to plan the clean up, to do research on the geography and ecology of the stream, and to develop insight into the larger aims of the project. The immediate benefit, he notes, is a cost reduction for the local government, which would have otherwise paid workers union-level wages to perform the clean up. However, the long-term benefits -- such as civic engagement, increased academic aptitude, and a disinclination to engage in risky behaviors -- must be measured quantitatively to make a compelling case for the advantages of service-learning programs.

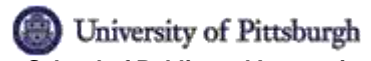


Stehle is inspired by the work of Shelley Billig, a pioneer in the service learning cost-benefit analytics field. Her research explores the impact of service learning on student's civic attitudes and actions, studies he hopes to build upon. At GSPIA, his ultimate goal is to generate enough collective enthusiasm about his research that a university organization funds longitudinal data studies of the benefits of service learning.

Currently, he submits his research to faculty and students to be peer-reviewed, further exploring how to appropriately frame quantitative service-learning research questions. In January 2007, he participated in Agora's "Presenting with Pizza," sharing a paper that delineated his quantitative theories — a presentation he later made to the Michigan Campus Compact in February 2007. He regularly discusses his findings with CNCS staff, and is mentoring GSPIA first-year student Julie Pickens to carry on his research when he graduates.

Of his work — soundly supported by GSPIA faculty, and piquing the curiosity of students -- he says, "It's a fresh set of eyes looking at a large amount of research, and attempting to come up with a template [for] a usable, valid approach."

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