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A comprehensive assessment model can measure the effects of service-learning on everyone involved.

A Comprehensive Model for Assessing Service-Learning and Community-University Partnerships

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A Service-Learning Partnership Story

Professor Jane and the city water department strike up a partnership around a federal grant to the city to measure the quality of urban watersheds and develop citizen education programs. Jane wants to expand on her own earlier research on the impact of lawn chemical runoff on watersheds. The city wants to develop plans for improving water quality by assessing current conditions and empowering residents to monitor and minimize their own impacts on water.

Jane prepares her biology class by orienting them to indicators of water quality, as well as urban water issues and policies. The students are trained and supervised by city staff in techniques for collecting water samples in the field. Back in the lab, the students learn methods for analyzing samples, interpret their findings, and write a scientific report for the city. They then practice communication skills by working with neighborhood associations to present their findings, lead field trips, and teach residents about the impact of their domestic actions on water quality. Residents tell students about their neighborhood concerns and in exchange learn how to monitor their local watershed and learn what actions to take if changes occur. The

students decide to volunteer for a door-to-door campaign to promote detaching home downspouts from sewers to reduce storm flooding.

Jane uses the field data to prepare a research paper on the impact of residential runoff. The city uses the data to develop a strategic plan for water improvement and to review public policies.

Reflection Questions
What are the outcomes of this activity?
Who is responsible for the outcomes?
Who benefited from this service-learning project?
Is this teaching, research, or service?

The answers to the reflection questions seem obvious. A well-designed service-learning activity involves and benefits all participants and requires shared responsibility for planning and outcomes. Service-learning can have multiple and diverse objectives for the same activity: building social responsibility and citizenship skills in students, enhancing student learning through practical experiences, creating synergy between the teaching and research roles of a faculty member, addressing unmet community needs, and increasing community capacity through shared action.

The work of service-learning is complex and multidimensional; it depends on a community-university collaboration in which all parties identify shared goals but also have distinct perspectives. Yet all too often, assessment of service-learning courses is limited to documenting hours of service or collecting journals; worse, it does not happen at all.

As more institutions create service-learning opportunities for students, the links between assessment, effectiveness, and these efforts become clear. However, assessment of such a complex activity can seem daunting. Thus, I suggest a comprehensive assessment model as a method for capturing the different perceptions of and impacts on each constituency participating in service-learning projects and for promoting ongoing improvement of service-learning programs and the partner relationships that sustain them.

The Role of Partnerships in Assessing Service-Learning

In service-learning settings, students are expected to provide direct community service as part of a course, to learn about and reflect on the community context in which service is provided, and to understand the connection between the service activity and the learning objectives of their course (Driscoll and others, 1998). Service-learning courses require many ingredients: faculty time and expertise, coordination and planning, transportation, community time and expertise, student time and commitment, and resources to fund supplies, materials, and products, to name a few.

The complexity of service-learning results in two major impacts on assessment strategies. First, given limitations of organizational time and

resources, an investment in service-learning must be measured for its impact and effectiveness in serving the educational mission of the institution. The return on the effort must justify the investment. This internal, more academic purpose for assessment is also essential to sustaining institutional commitment or expanding faculty involvement in service-learning courses. Faculty want to see evidence that service-learning is making a difference in the learning of course material, student development of social responsibility, or community conditions (Holland, 1999).

Second, an assessment of service-learning that focuses only on students will not capture essential data on the impacts of service-learning on faculty, community partners, and the institution. A service-learning course may meet objectives for student learning, but faculty must also monitor the intense impacts on other participants to improve and sustain the working relationship that is the underpinning of successful service-learning experiences. For service-learning to be sustained, the institution, faculty, students, and community partners must see benefits of shared effort.

Each of these constituents holds different goals and expectations for the project; arrives with different experiences, assets, and fears; and operates from a different sense of power and control. Overcoming differences requires the cultivation of a partnership based on knowledge exchange. Research on the characteristics of partnerships reveals that commitment to assessment activities can help the disparate members of a partnership track their progress and learn from the experience of working together. Assessment tends to put all partners on equal ground by attending to the participation, satisfaction, and perspectives of each stakeholder group (Holland and Ramaley, 1998).

A comprehensive assessment design, introduced at the earliest stages of a collaborative endeavor, such as service-learning, not only measures the impacts of the learning activity, but helps to enrich and sustain the underlying partnership itself. Yet assessment and evaluation often receive short shrift in the planning of most grants, projects, courses, and new programs. Many faculty are not assessment experts and avoid issues of assessment and evaluation unless program guidelines or administrative direction require that they consider them. However, as new initiatives in higher education, service-learning programs and community-university partnerships depend on effective assessment strategies to generate the evidence that will sustain internal and external support and document impacts. In addition, effective assessment can ensure consistent quality of effort and experience, build the body of knowledge about best practices, develop the evidentiary argument for additional resources, motivate others to participate by documenting outcomes, and generate ideas and lessons learned to share with others.

Assessment can also identify problem areas where improvement is needed, illuminate key issues and challenges, compare and contrast strategies and actions, and document successes that warrant celebration. In addition, new work as complex as service-learning inspires us to wonder about the outcomes. Have you ever thought, "I wonder if this experience made a

difference for the students or community members" or "That activity didn't seem to go the way I thought it would. I wonder what should be changed for next time." Answering these questions means planning ahead for the assessment of new activities even though you may not know all the questions before you begin—which is another reason to take a comprehensive approach.

Before you begin to design an assessment, consider using the following questions for individual or group reflection (Holland, Gelmon, and Baker, 1998; Shinnamon, Gelmon, and Holland, 1999; Gelmon, 2000).

- What is the purpose of my assessment?
- Who wants or needs the assessment information?
- What resources are available to support assessment?
- Who will conduct the assessment?
- How can I ensure the results are used?

The assessment of service-learning courses should begin by considering the balance between the curiosity that inspires us to question why things happen or how to make something better and the reality of the effort it takes to gain such understanding. These planning questions help ensure that the scope and scale of your assessment plan align with your objectives, resources, and audience. Engaging all constituents in exploring these questions also helps build trust and a greater awareness of common and different interests in the partnership.

Origins and Design of the Comprehensive Assessment Model

The issue of multiple goals and multiple constituencies is a major challenge to the task of evaluating service-learning. In addition, a common problem with assessment is the misguided collection of massive amounts of data without a clear vision of the key questions or an analytical framework to create a way of understanding what the data reveal. The model described here offers a strategy for focusing and organizing the data collection, analysis, and reporting of assessment endeavors where there are multiple goals and perspectives. This comprehensive model distills program or course goals into specific key variables or concepts and then develops one or more measurable indicators for each variable. These measurable indicators are incorporated into a diverse array of qualitative and quantitative methods. A matrix design ensures that every variable and indicator is addressed and that each instrument's contents can be connected back to the goals of the assessment.

The development of this model began with the work of a team of faculty, students, and community members from Portland State University (PSU) who created a case study method for analyzing the impacts of service-

learning on faculty, students, community, and institution (Driscoll and others, 1998). This approach focuses on capturing and interpreting the impacts that each constituency experiences. Rather than attempting to look only at general effects, this model uses specific measures of impacts and distinctive instruments for each group.

In this way, the assessment captures information that characterizes changes in the capacities, attitudes, and perceptions of participants, as well as their own subjective and objective perceptions of the value and effectiveness of the experience. Measuring those changes or impacts provides information that can be directly applied to improving the performance of service-learning activities as the partnership goes forward, new projects are initiated, or new community partners are added. Also, the design process provides a sharply focused guide for data collection and analysis, thus ensuring a systematic and structured interpretation of the information in a manner that increases the validity and reliability of findings (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Originally the PSU model was developed and piloted as a method for assessing the impacts of service-learning as a central component of PSU's sweeping reform of general education. This assessment framework has since been used by many other institutions to assess the impacts of service-learning or other types of civic engagement activities involving partnerships and multiple constituencies. One example is a national grant project to promote service-learning in health professions education: the Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN) program involving nineteen institutions of all types (Gelmon, Holland, and Shinnamon, 1998). The HPSISN adaptation is a useful example of shaping variables and indicators to reflect unique goals relevant to certain service-learning contexts and courses—in this case, the health professions.

The Assessment Framework. The comprehensive model for assessing service-learning is based on a goal-variable-indicator-method design:

- Goal: What do we want to know?
- Variable: What will we look for?
- Indicator: What will be measured?
- Method: How will it be measured?

This approach to assessment of service-learning begins with an exploration of goals and objectives. The question to ask is, "What do we want to know?" For example, a broad goal may be to increase the sense of social responsibility in students, and the hypothesis may be that service-learning will have a positive impact on students' attitudes and actions as citizens.

The next step is to break a large goal into specific areas of interest by asking, "What will we look for to find evidence of the impact of service-learning?" The task is to identify key issues that can be characterized as major variables of your assessment. Examples of key variables or concepts

you might derive from the goal on social responsibility (depending on your students' characteristics and other learning goals you have for them) include

- Awareness of community issues
- Involvement with community
- Concern about career goals and other interests
- Commitment to service

For each of these variables, the question to ask to generate measurable indicators as evidence of the presence or absence of progress toward the variable and its larger goal is, "What will be measured?" For the variable for commitment to service, indicators might include

- Hours of participation
- Level of participation over time
- Reactions to the challenges of service
- Intentions regarding future service

The final question, "How will it be measured?" guides the selection and design of methods for data collection. The questions in every instrument and protocol are linked to specific indicators to ensure that every indicator is measured (usually in more than one way) and that every data element collected has a purpose, thus facilitating analysis. Multiple indicators of each variable and multiple methods for measuring each indicator contribute to validity. In the example, the indicators might be measured using the following strategies:

- Hours of participation: survey, observation, logs
- Level of participation over time: survey, interview, observation
- Reactions to the challenges of service: survey, interview, focus group, journals
- Intentions regarding future service: survey, interview, focus group, journals

Using all these methods—or others you might devise—would be very labor intensive, so you will probably want to make some choices. However, this model's strength and record of success and adaptability depend in great part on a commitment to the use of multiple methods for most indicators, in order to cross-check answers and develop a rich understanding of the subjects' attitudes and perceptions. Each method helps to clarify, explain, verify, or elaborate on the data generated by a different method. Each instrument is designed to gather data on a variety of indicators, thus contributing to greater efficiency of effort.

Table 6.1 compares the strengths of different data collection strategies. For each strategy, cells in the matrix are checked to indicate its strengths or

Table 6.1. Comparative Strengths of Assessment Instruments

Instrument	Ease of Data Collection	Ease of Data Analysis	Richness of Data (descriptive)	Flexibility—Open to Unanticipated Data Findings	Promotes Reflection
Survey	x	x			
Interview			x	x	x
Focus groups			x	x	x
Observations			x	x	
Vita analysis	x	x			
Syllabus analysis	x	x			
Journals			x	x	x

Source: Driscoll and others, 1998, p. 17.

advantages. In addition to commonly used tools such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the table reports on the strengths of less common strategies that have been useful in service-learning evaluations, especially for capturing change over time or providing another test to corroborate findings from more traditional methods. These other useful strategies include direct observation of service-learning activities, analysis of service-learning course syllabi, analysis of faculty vitae, and analysis of reflection journals of students, faculty, or community partners.

Table 6.1 is useful in comparing the effort required for administration and analysis with the variety and richness of data collected. The best designs seek a balance among dimensions of effort, data quality, and fit with the indicators to be measured.

Instruments. The example given relates to the assessment of impact on students. The identical process of planning can be used to develop variables, indicators, and methods related to goals of the service-learning activity that relate to faculty, community, and the institution. This model is unique in its attention to the perspectives of community partners. Community organizations strive both to contribute to student learning through service and to use the partnership to enhance their own goals and capacity. Following are some examples of the kinds of variables and indicators that might be used to capture community partner impacts:

- Capacity to fulfill mission (new insights into organizational operations, new services initiated, increased capacity to serve clients)
- Economic impacts (value of service-learning services, new or leveraged funding, reduced or increased costs associated with service-learning activity)
- Perception of mutuality and reciprocity (self-articulation of role in project, articulation of goals for the partnership, articulation of benefits to the campus and students, articulation of unanticipated benefits to organization)

- Awareness of potential (analysis of mission or vision, development of new networks of partners, interest in new endeavors)
- Sustainability of partnership (articulation of criteria for success, cost-benefit analysis, perceptions of trust, suggestions for change or improvement)
- Satisfaction (intentions to continue, ability to articulate positive and negative feedback, recruitment of students for continued service or employment, references to service-learning in fundraising or publications, ideas for further interaction)

Engaging Stakeholders in Assessment. The translation of goals and objectives into a set of specific variables whose impact can be measured for each participant group requires consultation with those constituents in the design phase. The process of describing the project, activities, and variables takes time, but it can help ensure that the measurable indicators are an accurate reflection of participants' goals and expectations. Given that the framework attends to both impacts on participants and continuous improvement of the activity, the indicators chosen usually include a combination of measures of specific outcomes as well as attitudes, perceptions, and processes that are inherent to service-learning endeavors. Both process and product matter.

This shared approach to designing assessment especially helps community participants acquire a shared vocabulary, expand their understanding of the learning objectives of the project for students, and thus create a greater sense of common purpose. Again, we see that the processes of assessment design and implementation are tools for enhancing collaboration, trust, and reciprocity in the partnership that supports service-learning.

Challenges and Pitfalls of Assessment. Many pitfalls are associated with assessment, and most can be attributed to a lack of advance articulation of purpose, audience, resources, and dissemination strategies. The model proposed in this chapter compels designers to give early attention to planning as a means of avoiding most of the common problems with assessment design, implementation, and analysis. However, all assessments are challenging, and it is useful to be aware of the key issues that can trip up good work.

Without question, a comprehensive and ongoing assessment strategy requires substantial investment and commitment. The advantages conferred by such a plan (short- and long-term findings, greater trust among partners, information for continuous improvement) must be balanced with a realistic view of the time, expense, and human effort involved in assessment. Those participating in planning assessment programs will need to consider operational and practical issues to create a plan that has the potential to be fully implemented and sustained.

A comprehensive assessment plan generates a large amount of raw data that must be reviewed, analyzed, and gathered into appropriate reporting formats. Too often, idealistic assessment plans stall after one round, are reduced in scope, or never begin at all because the design was not specific

in delineating responsibilities, timetables, and a strategy for analysis and reporting.

An assessment plan must be of a scale in keeping with available resources—human, technical, and financial. What parts of the plan will be accomplished by an individual, a campus unit, a partnership committee? Where does ultimate leadership reside? The plan should clearly assign responsibilities for the assessment tasks of design, data collection, analysis, writing, and dissemination, including the development of an implementation budget.

Assessment design should also consider the availability of expertise. The instruments and analytical methods of assessment require specific skills and training. The temptation to say, "Let's make up a survey," belies the sophistication necessary for assessment tasks. Conducting assessments without the support of requisite design and analysis skills can lead to findings that have little meaning or impact on the program. Stakeholders and decision makers who will consider the results of assessment will be influenced by the quality of data and the synthesis. Individuals or institutions with limited access to internal expertise may want to adopt strategies, instruments, or protocols developed by other institutions or seek the advice of experts from other programs.

Conclusion

Too often we are tempted to undertake a new endeavor such as service-learning without sufficient attention to planning for assessment of the new activity. Or we wait until the end and then look at summative outcomes, which means we cannot really explain what contributed to or limited the outcomes we see. In addition, the growing commitment to service-learning is compelling institutions to make significant changes in academic work and culture. To extend and sustain these changes requires documenting the impact of service-learning and the effectiveness of strategies and methods of organizing the partnerships that sustain service-learning.

This model's strength is its attention to the complex dynamics behind service-learning—the collaborative work of students, faculty, their institutional context, and their community partners. By gathering systematic feedback from each group, the assessment strategy ensures that the entire service-learning endeavor is documented and improved. The design requires great effort in the beginning—to reach agreement on goals and develop appropriate variables, indicators, and methods—so that analysis can be done efficiently and accurately and can lead to compelling findings.

Expansion of service-learning into a broader array of courses, disciplines, and institutions will depend to a great degree on the ability of the first wave of service-learning faculty and campus leaders, the pioneers, to document and assess the work and the outcomes of service-learning. Many of those who follow will be persuaded by the strong evidence of impacts

captured through a formal and systematic strategy of assessment. In addition, the inclusive nature of this assessment model, especially the equal attention to community impacts and perspectives, is consistent with the collaborative values of service-learning, citizenship, and partnership.

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