

The Higher Educational Institution Assesses the Community Partnership in Service Learning: One Strategy for Institutionalizing Service Learning

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ABSTRACT

While a growing number of institutions offer service-learning courses, there is relatively little literature on the assessment of community partnerships with the institution. This study offers substantive institutional-community partner survey question examples from Campus Compact member websites targeting institutional assessment of the community partnership for ascertaining both the quality and effectiveness of service-learning on campus and for accreditation purposes. There is a paucity of service-learning institutional assessment research, and this study attempts to alleviate that gap.

INTRODUCTION

There are myriad reasons to assess students, community partners, or instructors when using service-learning. Some of these reasons would be to obtain feedback, to provide quality and effectiveness assurance, to use as a grading mechanism, to motivate partnerships to continue, to aid in accreditation, and to create new teaching and learning opportunities. One specific example would be that assessment in service-learning can contribute to demonstrating how a student stays on course and succeeds in areas such as having a strong work ethic, fairness, diversity, and patience (Okpala, Sturdivant, & Hopson, 2009). Service-learning assessment is defined as “the systematic collection of information about [student] learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decisions about how to improve learning” (Walvoord, 2004, p. 2).

A second example of the importance of service-learning would be that universities have long been concerned about student retention rates. Bringle, Hatcher, and Muthiah (2010) ascertained that students

taking a service-learning course in their first year typically had higher intentions of re-enrollment than non-service-learning students, thus improving a university’s retention rates. Prins (2002) examined service-learning at community colleges in New York and found administrators recognized retention as the number one reason for integrating service-learning on their campuses. Institutionalizing service-learning on campuses necessitates strengthening the relationship between the institution and the community partner, thereby possibly improving student retention rates at universities.

Quantitative assessment data such as closed questions on survey data can provide generalizable results for issues such as accreditation, measuring student progress, and demonstrating the efficacy of a course or program, while qualitative assessment such as open-ended questions on surveys, case studies, or focus group research can provide in-depth analysis of the same issues for understanding social interactions. Assessment in service-learning (Eyler, Giles, & Gray,

2000; Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001) typically assesses the student (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Moely & Miron, 2005), faculty (Holland, 1999; Wade & Demb, 2009), community partners (d'Arlach, Sanchez, & Feuer, 2009; Miron & Moely, 2006), and the institution (Chadwick & Pawlowski, 2007; Holland, 1997; Prins, 2002). In addition, partnerships within these four constituents can be assessed (Enos & Morton, 2003; Janke, 2009; Phillips & Ward, 2009).

Institutional Assessment

Service-learning assessment of the community partner by the university and of the university by the community partner helps to institutionalize service-learning. Institutionalizing service learning necessitates making service-learning a central characteristic of a university's mission and vision, while providing potential sustainability and success of service-learning initiatives (Young, Shinnar, Ackerman, Carruthers, & Young, 2007). Institutional assessment of service-learning is salient because participation in service-learning can impact the higher-educational institution in such constructs as role in the community, orientation to teaching and learning, resource acquisition, and image in the community (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996). "In order for service-learning to become institutionalized on college and university campuses, the institution must provide substantial resources, support, and muscle toward the effort" (Furco, 2002, p. 10).

The rationale for this study was to address how universities are using their online assessment instruments toward institutionalization by analyzing questions that are from the institution targeting the community partner. There is a dearth of higher-educational institutions using service-learning assessment at the institutional level, thus this study was conducted to fill that gap by providing a survey that can be generated according to an institution's wants and needs. By using results from this research,

educational institutions can straightforwardly assess service-learning of the community partner. This research is an extension of another study that focused on community partner assessment by faculty (Waters & Cemore Brigden, 2013).

Furco (2002), in his self-assessment rubric for the institutionalization of service-learning, examines institutional support for service-learning in what he designates as Dimension V. He has the following six categories within this Dimension: coordinating entity, policy-making entity, staffing, funding, administrative support, and evaluation and assessment. For the sixth category of evaluation and assessment, the crux of this study, he lists three stages of institutionalizing service-learning.

1. Stage one labeled Crucial Mass Building notes, "there is no organized, campus-wide effort underway to account for the number and quality of service-learning activities taking place" on campus (p. 10).
2. Furco's stage two of Quality Building aims to rectify stage one by suggesting the institution put forth an initiative that accounts for the number and quality of service-learning activities within the institution.
3. His stage three of Sustained Institutionalization concludes the task with the higher educational institution having "an ongoing, systematic effort in place to account for the number and quality of service-learning activities taking place throughout the campus" (p. 10).

This present study supports and contributes to Furco's proposed institutional service-learning initiative and ongoing, systematic effort for evaluation and assessment of service-learning by providing tools to systematically account for the quality of service-learning activities taking place throughout a campus, helping to institutionalize and sustain service-learning on campuses.

Assessment Defined

Rust (2002) defines assessment as follows:

[It is] an evaluation or appraisal; it is about making a judgment, identifying the strengths and weaknesses, the good and the bad, and the right and the wrong in some cases. It is more than simply giving marks or grades, although that may well be a part of it. Because it involves making a judgment, it will almost inevitably include an element of subjectivity by the assessor. However, we should strive to make assessment as objective, fair and transparent as possible (p. 1).

Assessment Principles. Some principles of assessment are reliability, validity, relevance and transferability, and criterion versus norm referenced assessment (Rust, 2002). Reliability denotes that an instructor acting independently using a certain assessment tool would have the equivalent outcome as another instructor using the same assessment tool; in service-learning this might be thought of as adaptability of a course or program. Validity simply specifies that the assessment tool assesses what it is supposed to assess. Relevance and transferability refer to constructing an assessment tool that can actually assess skills within an identifiable context to create a real-life setting with purpose from an abstract concept that the student has perhaps memorized.

Program Theory as a Theoretical Perspective

Program theory combines descriptive, explanatory/prescriptive, and practice-type theories (Chen, 1990; Sandmann, Kiely, & Grenier, 2009) for building and evaluating service-learning programs from an institutional point of view and typically has six fundamentals: problem definition, mediating processes, expected output, exogenous factors, critical inputs, and implementation issues (Lipsey, 1993). Program theory aids in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of a service-learning program and in identifying the key

factors when creating comprehensive assessment tools for evaluating students, faculty, and community partners. When planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning programs, the educator benefits from a fundamental understanding of service-learning and community engagement pedagogy and theory. In short, providing detailed, specific evidence discovered from assessment about what characteristics of a successful service-learning course made it successful is one goal of program theory evaluation so that the course can be adapted to different circumstances (Hacsi, 2000).

Because reflection is a key component for Yarbrough and Wade's (2001) research contributed to the theoretical development of a program theory approach to service-learning assessment. All of their fundamental concepts can be assessed (excerpted from Table 1, p. 108):

(1) Needs: (A) What is the need for the program and the problems the program will address? (B) What are the needs for improved knowledge skill, behavior, and attitudes in these students?

(2) Characteristics of the people who will be affected: (A) What are the characteristics of the selected program participants? (B) What are the characteristics of the students?

(3) Addressing needs (or solving problems): (A) What are some possible solutions to meet the program participants' needs? (B) What are some possible solutions to meet the students' needs?

(4) Program goals: (A) What are the community and participant goals? (B) What are the goals of the students?

(5) Resources: (A) What resources are available and required to achieve the community service program goals? (B) What resources are available and required to help our students achieve these selected, best goals?

(6) Program implementation and activities: (A) How will the program be implemented—what program activities take place? (B) What activities will the students actually engage in and how do they fit into the program?

(7) Outcomes and impacts: (A) Given the goals, activities, participant experience, program staff, resources brought to bear, sub-problems, and probable causes, what short- and long-term, enabling and final outcomes and impacts can we expect?(B) Given our model about why these activities should result in changes in the students, what short- and long-term, enabling and final outcomes and impacts on the students can we expect?

As the semester progressed, the reflections indicated a majority of the students found a deeper appreciation for health-related fitness and recognized the benefits of this experience as preparation for future careers.

What is not clear from their typology is a connection from the service-learning experience to the university, although it could be construed to fall under outcomes and impacts. This research fills that gap by providing a list of open and closed-ended survey questions that can be used for assessing the relationship between the university and the service-learning program provided by the partnership with the community.

Research Questions

RQ1: What institutional partnership survey themes for community partners emerge from extant literature that could frame survey questions found online from Campus Compact members' websites?

RQ2: In service-learning courses, what institutional questions for community partnerships are not being surveyed by Campus Compact members as found on their websites?

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

For this study, 92 Campus Compact member schools' surveys from 28 states for a total of 142 survey questions were analyzed. These were all the available online *institutional survey tools* of Campus Compact members. Schools included in this study were

community colleges and four-year institutions, both primary and satellite. A research assistant used the Campus Compact database with the alphabetical list of college and university members to access the institutional survey tools. The assistant used terms such as "community," "civic," "service-learning," and/or "engagement" to find the surveys or resources section of the campus service-learning office.

Next the assistant recorded the name of the university, the URL, and contact information. He subsequently sorted the schools into one of four categories as follows: (1) "No service-learning information available"—meaning the school did not dedicate any portion of their website to service-learning or community engagement, (2) "No online assessment" meaning the school had a service-learning presence online, but no assessment tools were available to download, (3) "Online assessment"—meaning an assessment survey tool or tools were available to download, in which case the research assistant downloaded the surveys, and (4) "Website down"—meaning the Campus Compact member's website was not working properly. After the assessment tools were downloaded, they were then sorted according to participant type: instructor, student, or community partner. Specifically for the present research, all surveys were judged to find questions applicable for an institutional survey.

Data Analysis

This study used a qualitative content analysis defined by Krippendorff (2013): "Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 24). The qualitative content analysis procedures are outlined in this section.

"Establishing trustworthiness and authenticity. To establish trustworthiness and authenticity of the research, several verification procedures were used in planning the data collection and analysis. Creswell (1998) discussed eight procedures for this

process: prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer reviewing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checks, rich description, and external audits. He recommended “qualitative researchers engage in at least two of them in any given study” (p. 203). Prolonged engagement and peer reviewing, chosen from the eight recommended procedures, were used in this study.

The program continues to produce unexpected positive benefits for both students and the community. The instructor of the practicum formed a partnership with another local university to implement Bingocize™ at seven additional older adult facilities. This expansion has enabled intergenerational service-learning opportunities for more than 20 undergraduate students and helped over 70 older adults become more physically active.

Prolonged engagement included learning the culture and checking for distortions introduced by the researcher and/or informants (Creswell, 1998). Prolonged engagement was established by the researcher’s personal experience teaching with service-learning pedagogy for more than 10 years and, in addition, implementing research on service-learning and assessment for seven years. A preliminary step of analysis was a self-reflection on service-learning and its use at the university, the process of institutional partnership formation from the extant literature, and how service-learning partnerships/relationships could be inaugurated and maintained at an institution. After this reflection and check of distortions was completed, peer reviewing began.

Peer reviewing provides an external check of the research similar to inter-rater reliability in quantitative research (Creswell, 1998). The researcher and her research assistant served as a constant check on the study. The researcher used the research assistant to check after each step of analysis including verifying conceptualizations, checking for possible researcher influence, and serving as a regulator once data horizontalization occurred, meaningful concepts were developed, and structural descriptions were created.

The researcher followed Creswell’s (1998) outline of analysis for the phenomenological tradition of inquiry: *data managing, reading/writing memos, describing, classifying, interpreting, representing, and visualizing*. This analysis began with 142 individual questions for community partner, instructor, and student participants from 92 schools in the United States. The steps were as follows: read through each of the assessments several times from the 92 schools, examine each individual question and decide if an institution would benefit from an answer to a specific question, form initial codes and concepts, and finally, have the research assistant read the chosen questions and formulated notes for each question checking for agreement of analysis. If there were differences, these differences were discussed until agreement was reached” (Waters & Cemore Brigden, 2013).

The 142 original questions were listed and then reduced by comparing similar questions, allowing 112 questions for examination. These questions were examined with each having equal importance; subsequently, similar questions were grouped together by concept, leaving nine questioning themes emerging from the concepts. These concepts were then matched to existent literature concepts for a total of 29 questions, including three questions added by the researcher.

RESULTS

This study examined 92 Campus Compact member schools’ online institutional partner surveys accumulating a total of 142 questions. The 142 questions were then sorted and analyzed by common themes and questions, reducing the total questions to 29 questions.

RQ1: What institutional partner survey themes for community partners emerge from extant literature that could frame survey questions found online from Campus Compact members’ websites?

To answer RQ1, extant assessment survey literature was examined about institutions, community partners, and

instructors in service-learning to find common themes. *Six themes* emerged from analysis of the 142 questions and collapsed groups as follows: 1. Communication and Coordination with University Service-Learning, 2. Sustainability of Partnership, 3. Satisfaction with the Service-Learning Experience, 4. Board and Staff Relations, 5. Community-University Partnership, and 6. Faculty Involvement and Engagement. All of these questions could be asked after the service-learning intervention. The starred questions in Table 1 were added by the researcher (i.e., not found in the literature) after reviewing the literature. See Table 1 for questions and themes that emerged from the study.

RQ2: In service-learning courses, what institutional questions for community partners are not being surveyed by Campus

Compact members as found on their websites?

To answer RQ2, three new questions, not found in any of the online surveys, were derived from the existing literature. The first new question added by the researcher was, “What should the university do differently next time?” (Gelmon et al., 2001, p. 102). After reviewing the Campus Compact (2012) results of the annual community partner survey presented in their executive summary, two more questions were added to the survey: “Did you participate in the classroom as a co-instructor or speaker? If your answer is yes, explain,” and “Do you serve on campus committees? If your answer is yes, explain.”

DISCUSSION

NEW QUESTIONS AND THEMES

Table 1

Community Partner Questions to be used by a University Service-Learning Office clustered by Question Concepts adopted from Extant Literature

Question Themes	Question	Schools with Similar Questions
Communication and Coordination with University Service-Learning (Vernon & Ward, 1999)	Any suggestions for improvement?	28
	How can we better prepare students for your agency/organization?	1
	Did you receive orientation from the service-learning office? If your answer is yes, explain.	1
	Would you like to talk with someone from the service-learning office?	3
Sustainability of Partnership (Gelmon et al., 2001)	Did you have a mutually beneficial relationship with the student(s)?	2
	Did you have a mutually beneficial relationship in your partnership with the university?	1

Question Themes	Question	Schools with Similar Questions
	Would you like to continue having service-learning students at your agency/organization?	43
	What needs do you have that we could assist with in the future?	3
	Would you be interested in hiring a student as an intern in the future?	12
	Are there additional service-learning courses you would like to work with?	3
	Would you recommend this program? Why or why not?	3
Satisfaction with the Service-Learning Experience (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006)	Do you feel this was a worthwhile experience for the student and you? Why or why not?	6
	Should service-learning be implemented in more classes?	1
	Was the service-learning program well organized?	1
Board and Staff Relations (Schaffer, 2012)	Did the service-learning staff effectively communicate to you?	2
	Did the service-learning staff effectively address conflict or issues when they arose?	2
	Was the service-learning staff professional at all times (e.g., helpful and supportive)?	2
Community-University Partnership (Gelmon et al., 2001)	Are you satisfied with the support given service-learning from the university? Explain.	10
	Have your perceptions of the school changed because of the project? If yes, how have they changed?	2
	Do/did you feel adequately informed about service-learning?	1
	What should the university do differently next time? (Gelmon et al., 2001, p. 102)*	Question added by researcher
	Are you interested in developing an extended relationship with the university?	2

Question Themes	Question	Schools with Similar Questions
	Did the student's service help bring the university and community closer together?	1
	Did you participate in the classroom as a co-instructor/speaker? If your answer is yes, explain.*	Question added by researcher
	Do you serve on campus committees? If your answer is yes, explain.*	Question added by researcher
Faculty Involvement and Engagement (Wade & Demb, 2009)	What could faculty do to provide you with better support? Explain.	3
	Were there any barriers in the relationship with the service-learning faculty? Explain.	3
	Did you receive course materials from the service-learning instructor? If your answer is yes, explain.	1
	Did you develop a good working relationship with the service-learning instructor?	2
Total Questions		142

The results of this study conclude that 92 universities and colleges who are members of Campus Compact and posted their surveys online use somewhat similar assessment tools. For research question one, six themes emerged that embody institutional assessment of service-learning practices: Communication and Coordination with University Service-

Learning, Sustainability of Partnership, Satisfaction with the Service-Learning Experience, Board and Staff Relations, Community-University Partnership, and Faculty Involvement and Engagement. The new themes for this research compared to previous assessment literature (Waters & Cemore Brigden, 2013) are Board and Staff Relations (Schaffer, 2012) and Faculty Involvement and Engagement (Wade & Demb, 2009). In addition, three new questions emerged, including "What should

the university do differently next time?" taken from Gelmon et al. (2001, p. 102).

The other two questions emerged from the Campus Compact (2012) annual membership survey executive summary. The executive summary pointed out that community partners are involved in student learning and engagement (see Figure 2, Campus Compact, 2012) in eight different approaches. Ninety-one percent of the respondents to the Campus Compact survey said they have community partners come into the class as speakers. The approach that was least used according to the respondents of the survey was using community partners as compensated co-instructors (i.e., 13%), so it was not included in this research. The new questions formulated from the executive summary results (Campus Compact, 2012) are as follows: "Did you help design the

curriculum, syllabus or delivery of the course? If your answer is yes, explain,” “Did you participate in the classroom as a co-instructor or speaker? If your answer is yes, explain,” and “Do you serve on campus committees? If your answer is yes, explain.” These questions drive the instructor to consider using the community partner in a unique partnership. Also, the addition of “If your answer is yes, explain” to several questions provides qualitative answers that give richness and depth to the survey questions. Qualtrics survey software allows for both quantitative and qualitative answers to be inserted effortlessly for an online survey.

Other questions not used in this survey could be used by the institution. These questions were not general to most universities, but could be addressed to community partnerships from the institution and/or service-learning office and integrated into an institutional survey:

1. *Has service-learning helped you identify (name of university) as a source for volunteers?* This question situates service-learning as a student volunteer bank for the community, rather than allowing for the partnership between the four constituents: Student, instructor, university, and community partner. Other similar questions from Campus Compact online surveys include: *What suggestions do you have to improve our volunteer service? When will you need volunteers again?*

2. *Was a service-learning contract completed by the student and received by an agency representative?* Many schools do not use service-learning contracts, although it is a good practice for both legal issues and making sure the community partner(s) understand(s) the project and what to expect of the students.

3. *In what specific ways did your organization benefit from its partnership with the university?* This question asks for

specifics and could help strengthen the bond between the community partner and institution.

4. *The service-learning institute would like to recognize outstanding service-learners, faculty, and community partners at our annual “Spotlight on Service” on (give date and time here). Please indicate the name(s) of service learners, community partners, and/or faculty you would like to recommend for this special honor.* Students, faculty, and community partners always appreciate awards and honors. It is recommended to include a certificate that can hang in the office of the awardee. Video of the ceremony could be posted on the service-learning website, along with biographies and other details.

Assessment of Community-University Partnership

Institutional assessment of service-learning is sparsely used (Bortolin, 2011; Cruz & Giles, 2000; Vernon & Ward, 1999), as service-learning is still at the inaugural stages for many universities. Understanding the relationship of the service-learning partnership between the university and the community partner is important, and use of the survey found in Table 1 is intended to help make that connection. Program theory (Yarbrough & Wade, 2001) provides ideas about other areas to explore when formulating questions for a survey for assessment. Indispensable to the success of service-learning on any campus is a strong healthy relationship and partnership between the university and community. “The goal in research and practice should be developing the university as co-creator and co-educator of knowledge for the campus-university partnership with a mutuality of benefits, rather than the university being privileged over the community” (Waters & Cemore Brigden, 2013, p. 111). Obtaining this goal

produces transformative relationships with objectives such as proactive pursuit, campus/community fusion and consistency in relationships (Phillips & Ward, 2009) creating authentic impact and outcomes both within the community and on institutional campuses.

Limitations of study

One limitation of this study was that the researcher does not know how many community partners were assessed with the Campus Compact online surveys. Also, the Campus Compact member institutions were not contacted to inquire about other surveys that might be available besides those online which could create selection bias. Finally, the researcher has no data concerning validity or reliability of the surveys posted online and examined in this study.

Future Research

The two constituents—student and faculty—could be researched separately by the researcher, examining current assessment studies of each constituent from the original database and existing service-learning literature as this study has accomplished. The community partner assessment literature has already been researched in a separate publication (Waters & Cemore Brigden, 2013). Creating common surveys that could constitute best practices for universities to use throughout the United States is the long-term goal of this research. Universities in turn could use the surveys for accreditation purposes and for evaluating the quality and effectiveness outcomes of service-learning and community engagement on their campuses. Additionally, the researcher would like to develop a needs-based survey for capturing the needs of potential and existing community partners.

CONCLUSION

Through strategic assessment of the partnership between the institution and community partners, the survey (Table 1) could assist the institution with appraising the effectiveness and quality of the service-learning programs on campus, thus aiding in institutionalizing service-learning on campus. The survey results could be distributed to community partners, the university administration, and the campus community—especially Student Affairs and the Service-Learning Center (Walvoord, 2004). The institution could strategically decide which questions are most applicable to its situation with community partnerships, and use those questions in its survey. Some of these questions could be reworded to be used before and after the intervention, in order to obtain data that show the influence of service-learning within each course and across the campus. Although strategic assessment can be time-consuming and uses resources that are constrained at times, positive assessment of service-learning and community engagement across campuses could highlight and emphasize the relevant efforts of instructors, institutions, and community partners in making service-learning a visible component of sustainable partnerships while institutionalizing a strong, mutually beneficial relationship between all constituents.

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BIOGRAPHY

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