IMPLEMENTING SERVICE LEARNING INTO ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

Engaging in community partnerships provides unique benefits to students, faculty, institutions, and community organizations around the world. Benefits of creating such relationships – known as community engagement in some circles, and in other circles as 'service learning'– leads to financial benefits for the institution, enhances the prestige and visibility of the institution, and strengthens democratic values by reinforcing civic responsibility in students, while expanding job opportunities for graduates. Despite the benefits from creating academic projects designed to engage students in the community as a part of the educational experience, implementation of service learning is not universal. This paper reviews some of the benefits of service learning, identifies commonly perceived difficulties in implementing service learning, offers solutions on how to overcome such difficulties, and finally provides real suggestions to begin implementing service learning, either individually or institutionally.

Keywords: Community partnerships, community engagement, service learning, collaborative learning projects, hands-on-learning,

INTRODUCTION

Service learning and community partnerships are a benefit to students, faculty, institutions, and community partners, in the United States and around the world. Unfortunately, not all institutions utilize service learning to help their students gain vital experiences and skills necessary to advance professionally and become engaged with their communities. This paper reviews the primary benefits of service learning, identifies commonly perceived difficulties to implementing service learning, and offers solutions on how to overcome such difficulties, finally providing models and suggestions for individuals and institutions to begin implementing service learning.

Creating academic projects designed to engage students in the community as a part of the educational experience provides valuable benefits to both academic and business sectors. Benefits of creating such relationships – known as community engagement in some circles, and in other circles as 'service learning'– leads to stronger financial standing, enhances the prestige and visibility of the institution, strengthens democratic values by reinforcing civic responsibility in students, while expanding job opportunities for graduates.

Service is not simply a good in itself, but a means to many ends. Participation makes better citizens. Service learning opportunities lead to subtle changes in participants' character, and

while these changes may come about slowly, they prove to be powerful (Cress, Collier, Reitenauer, & Associates, 2013). Anyone who has actively participated in service takes away the feeling that the experience has changed him or her. Those who observe active participation of others often believe that they see its long-term effects on the citizens' character. "Feelings and opinions are recruited, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal influence of men upon one another" (Tocqueville, 2004, p. 631). Community engagement or service learning for our purposes is defined as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby and Associates, 1996, p. 5).

It is believed that citizens who participate in such service programs often transform into lifelong volunteers and civic leaders. Service can act as a training program for idealists, many of whom go on to take leading roles in nonprofit and government agencies (Kerns, Shelton, & Puglisi, 2014). Service learning can strengthen the ties that bind us together and have been shown to lead to a lifetime of civic engagement (Bee & Guerrina, 2014).

> Civic engagement is acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one's communities. This includes a wide range of activities, including developing civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good. Through civic engagement, individuals—as citizens of their communities, their nations, and the world—are empowered as agents of positive social change for a more democratic world. (Jacoby, 2009, p. 9)

When service is seen as a bridge to genuine political and civic responsibility, it can strengthen democratic government and foster republican virtues (Dionne, 2003). Service connects groups of people that have little to do with each other otherwise. According to Justice Rendell, federal judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, the concepts of civic responsibility are tools for young students to build "active participation in an expanding, pluralistic society in which citizenship, social responsibility, human rights, community and mutual respect are inseparable" (Rendell, 2006). This awareness can only come from an education where civic learning is integrated with normal pedagogic tools, not as peripheral to curricula, but as a vital component in a comprehensive education. Service learning helps to provide a heightened sense of civic responsibility. Therefore, it is important to provide service-learning opportunities to both undergraduate and graduate students. Young people are eager to participate in activities that improve their communities and their own lives while enhancing their resumes. What is missing is not motivation and interest from young citizens, but rather, the structured opportunities to develop the skills, knowledge and values necessary to "build strong communities and democratic and participatory cultures" (Alessi, 2005).

Service learning provides students an opportunity to take part in new experiences, allowing alternative narratives to be introduced – allowing students to grow, develop, and advance their skills in their intended field, and create mutually beneficial community ties. Service learning opportunities provide students, faculty, and the community with new insights and leads to heightened mutual awareness.

BENEFITS OF EXPANDING SERVICE LEARNING OFFERINGS

Community partnerships broaden and deepen academic experiences for students by allowing them to work on real-world projects, through curriculum-based service learning opportunities. These opportunities allow students to collaborate with nonprofit and community leaders as they seek to achieve their organizational missions and academic learning objectives. The services provided by these partnerships would normally not be available to these organizations due to their cost and/or diverse needs (Kerns et al, 2014). Sometimes service learning can "bring people out of isolation and into a community" and is considered as an act of a good or service (Dionne, & Drogosz, 2003).

While there is empirical support for service learning in general, specific benefits of service learning for students, faculty, and community partners was compiled through a three-year long collaboration between three universities. Led by Elizabeth Kerns at Central Washington State University and joined by Amiee Shelton at Roger Williams University and Gemma Puglisi at American University, qualitative data and anecdotal evidence was pooled, and presented at the Educators Academy of the Public relations Society of America's national conference in 2014. Some of these findings are presented below.

Benefits for students

There are many benefits for students. Specifically adding a service learning component in classrooms can provide well-organized and educationally valid real world experience for students during the appropriate phases of their academic careers, and provide trans-disciplinary opportunities for faculty/student collaboration on project-based activities, effectively linking the classroom with the community (Kerns, et al., 2014). In addition, benefits include the enhancement of student learning through the joining of theory with experience and thought with action. Lastly, service-learning projects provide an opportunity for a community to shape students' values to prepare students for community participation after college (Kerns & Shelton, 2014).

Benefits to faculty

Implementing service learning projects into coursework affords the faculty member serving as the service-learning coordinator a high level of community involvement. This in turn provides necessary insight into the community, and provides the necessary "service" component for the faculty member within their workload agreement for promotion. Projects yield data and case studies for research, which also adds to a promotion file, and provides an outlet for faculty to reinforce the curriculum taught, providing a base to make necessary curriculum changes (Kerns & Shelton, 2014). The service learning component also has the ability to create a network of academics and professionals providing collaboration opportunities, with the ability to share resources, gain new knowledge, and enhance the collective impact of the academic field (Kerns, et al., 2014). Lastly, the collaborative nature of service learning projects, which engage the community, provides excellent material to use to apply for a variety of grants (Kerns & Shelton, 2014) both domestically and abroad.

Benefits for community

Businesses benefit from these partnerships by gaining valuable insight from young professionals with an advisor mentoring the students through the specific project (Kerns et al, 2014). The services provided by the service-learning project can be normally cost prohibitive to service sponsors/community members. Therefore, providing multi-disciplinary assistance to communities and organizations on real projects can improve the economic, social and physical environments (Kerns, et al., 2014). Generally speaking, service learning projects assists to meet unmet community needs, exposes and teaches communities about emerging generations of students. Lastly, these projects can help establish access and connections to other resources available at the college or university for communities (Kerns, et al., 2014).

The multiple benefits of service learning for students, faculty, and community partners, explained above, should put to rest any hesitation that one may have toward the need for implementing service learning into all curriculums across all fields of study. However, there remain, for some, real difficulties in actually implementing service learning that we will discuss.

OVERCOMING DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTATION

Some institutions do in fact utilize service learning in certain curriculum; the problem is that it often exists in only a few departments within only a handful of classes (Umpleby & Rakicevik, 2008). For many, community engagement is not a universal practice. In the departments where professors are taking initiatives, it can be a struggle to gain recognition and win support from the university as a whole. There are many reasons for why institutions have not, as of yet, realized the enriching impact service learning has on all students in all disciplines. In this section we will highlight a few common difficulties and proven ways of overcoming them. The suggestions provided below are tried and tested by multiple professors from a assortment of institutions.

One key difficulty in the implementation of community projects stems from the terminology. Under socialism, in the Soviet Union for example, there was a strong emphasis on working for the good of the whole society (rather than for the individual), where service was usually required. In fact, it was common practice for the government to announce that students from a particular university, residents of a neighborhood, or workers in a particular factory, would be conscripted for a day or several days to perform a needed task. That "voluntary activity" usually meant a "work day" or "subotnik," thus the term service learning may have negative connotations as people may see the community engagement project as compulsory, uncompensated work. Therefore, framing your community engagement project as one that provides assistance to the community, and focusing on the benefits to the community may overcome negative or mixed feelings.

Another problem we have encountered regards the client selection process for these collaborative learning projects. For some, the decision is influenced by political considerations. For example, faculty members and students might be told to work with one political party over another. Consequently, historical experience causes some to interpret collaborative educational projects as a form of unpaid labor to aid the politically powerful and therefore to be rejected. This is where framing also comes into play. The messages underpinning service-learning projects should

use key words such as "democratic engagement" and "core purpose" of 21st century higher education learning (Calderón, 2007, xxi-xxv).

A lack of confidence has been cited as a potential obstacle in implementing service learning in curricula (Umpleby & Rakicevik, 2008). As many professors probably have not had any experience with service learning as students, they will be cautious about introducing service learning in their courses. To this end, faculty members working together can implement service learning across courses or disciplines. In this way, each instructor will have the support and confidence of the other, allowing them to overcome fears and hesitation jointly (Kerns & Shelton, 2014). There are also a myriad of courses, workshops, and literature available on credible, thoughtful and logistic approaches to creating service learning opportunities and conference across the world feature presentations and panels discussing service-learning opportunities. Examples of organizations include the Public Relations Society of America's Educator Academy conference, The International Communication Association, The Council of Europe, and more. Many disciplines find ways to reward service learning activities. Professional associations provide space at meetings and in journals for presentations and articles based on service learning teaching and research. The *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* is an example of a peer-reviewed forum for publishing articles on service learning research and pedagogy.

Extra work has also been cited as an obstacle (Kerns & Shelton, 2014; Umpleby & Rakicevik, 2008). While there is definitely a learning curve for instructors when beginning to incorporate service learning projects into their class, Kerns & Shelton (2014) find that after the first year, the time commitment of service learning projects is not more than traditional course preparation. While service learning can be labor intensive at first, educators can quickly learn from others the best design and execution methods to reduce the workload, and specific strategies to manage projects successfully. Therefore, Kerns, et al (2014) recommends recruiting as broad a base of support as possible in creating service-learning program and to work on cutting across departmental and program boundaries to create an interdisciplinary support system.

The question of workload is an important one because a critical question for faculty members considering adopting service learning pedagogy is how the university will evaluate it. Presently, while service is a component in the tenure and promotion process at many universities, it often ranks below research, teaching, and curriculum design. Therefore it is important for faculty members to find ways to engage service learning into all areas of their academic venture. One way to do this, for example, is to develop a portfolio system to document the teaching and learning objectives of service learning courses. This would provide data necessary to build a strong file for tenure or promotion review that may feature heavy service learning opportunities (Daloz, 2000). Overall, there is an expanding body of scholarship that is helping promotion and tenure. For example, the Campus Compact's "Invisible College" is designed to offer professional development support for its members, paralleling more traditional discipline paths. The Campus Compact is a national coalition of nearly 1,100 colleges and universities committed to the public purposes of higher education. The network comprises of a national office and 34 state and regional Campus Compacts. As the only national higher education association dedicated solely to campus-based civic engagement, Campus Compact enables campuses to develop students' citizenship skills and forge effective community partnerships. There are a myriad of resources to

support faculty and staff as they pursue community-based teaching and scholarship. Additionally, Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, France have service learning efforts and have horning these methods since the late 1960's. For example, Germany has the Das Hochschulnetzwerk, a coalition of universities, working to increase service learning opportunities and the civic commitment of students. Basically, this network of universities and colleges aims to provide corporate social responsibility at universities.

Some colleagues may be skeptical of service learning, equating it with students' independent community service, and opposing the granting of credit for extra curricular activities. Therefore, peer education is needed to distinguish service learning from community service and to promote widespread development of appropriate service learning opportunities across the curriculum. This is where having interdisciplinary support is important. Speaking from different points of views, and using language inherent in different disciplines, albeit with one voice makes communicating the need for service learning easier (Kerns et al, 2014).

Many students see internships as an important component to supplement coursework (even beyond the required internships that most applied academic programs have). While, many companies choose only the best students for internships and usually only the most motivated and assertive students apply for the best internships, service learning projects are also viable for resumes (Kerns & Shelton, 2014). Therefore, it is vital for students to be introduced to service learning projects as resume enhancing opportunities. Therefore, students will need to be primed to understand the unique learning opportunity they have been given (Kerns et al, 2014). One idea that should be developed in students is the idea that this project goes on their resumes (when job-hunting) in a manner that coursework does not. In fact, many students add a line to their relevant experience section on their resumes with the service learning opportunity. Framing these class projects as training for the real world, and providing a line item on student resumes is the best way to engage student's passions and interests in a project (Kerns & Shelton, 2014).

Students are often reticent to find time outside of class to do project work. Creating service learning projects allows time to be spent in the classroom working on the project, as projects reinforce the theories and practices from lessons plans. This is important regarding both student engagement and time management for the instructor. Projects should be chosen based on how well the goals of the project line up with the course objectives. In this way, assessment of student learning can take place for the course based on the projects implementation, and does not take up additional time for either students or instructors.

IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Before we begin a discussion on how you can create community engagement opportunities to capitalize on service learning opportunities, consider this example of a missed opportunity to create a beneficial relationship with the community. There are programs in several institutions of higher education that focus on tourism and culture. Once such program, Management of Culture and Tourism, at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra (Slovakia) has students create tourism projects as requirements in multiple courses. Hands-on-learning in this case is a strong pedagogical position, as it allows students to learn first hand what it takes to produce meaningful communication with potential tourists. Courses that allow for participation or active learning is

essential for individuals to gain knowledge and develop as citizens. However, in this instance, the students do not work with the community on their tourism projects. Instead, students are given 'mock' clients and told to create projects. However, having students work on their own, and not with the community, actually inhibits student growth, and misses out on a beneficial community relationship. A student who creates a program or project without input from the client does not learn necessary skills in diplomacy, budgeting, listening, negotiation or how to successfully pitch or sell their ideas. But more relevant to our discussion here, the beneficial relationship between the professor, students and this community client was ignored. A long-term relationship could have been easily cultivated in this situation either through regular correspondence, communication, or by simply inviting the tourism board/ NGO etc. to review the final projects and provide feedback. This could have led to a more formalized collaboration between academia and business, and led to future opportunities for the program, the students, and the professor. There are several ways in which a relationship such as this could develop in college courses. It can be done individually, or institutionally.

Individual Implementation

The suggestions in this section stem from the collaboration between Kerns, Shelton, and Puglisi (2014). Each of the suggestions provided below have been used successfully for years in a variety of courses and fields. Each of the professor above have their own method of generating clients, and one does not work better then another. Individually, professors can approach community leaders, local NGOs, small businesses, and tourism boards to see what projects are needed and volunteer free student services. Recruitment of project work also stems from board in which the instructor sit on, coffee house discussions and cold calling. Through these various methods, instructors create a personal connection between their classroom and business/organization leaders and by extension, the university and the community. In this individualized approach, the instructor creates and maintains a dialogue with the public entity, where the outside organization works with students to provide background information and materials to assist the students in their creative pursuits (Kerns & Shelton, 2014). In this situation, the instructor acts as a bridge between the 'client' and the student learners. Therefore, it is vitally important that the professor/instructor try to establish clear guidelines regarding what the final product delivered by the students will include (Kerns, et al., 2014) and disseminated to both students and community partners.

Often times, the biggest concern for the professor/instructor is to convince the organization to permit the students' access to and permission to use, logos and other organizational collateral material for the purpose of creating this project. When getting access to what come consider propriety information, it is important that the students and community organization understand that the logos and creative materials designed for the project by the students of the outside organization are for the purpose of creating various tangibles. In some cases, the instructor/professor can ensure that these tangibles are not disseminated, but are created for the purpose of an educational experience (Kerns, et al., 2014). At the end of the course, students would present the material to the outside organization, and receive feedback. This presentation usually takes place either at the university or at the community organization at a pre-arranged time acceptable for all entities. The organization would then have permission to use any creative work that came from this relationship. In the U.S., this type of relationship has been found to be

productive regarding student internship opportunities and future employment opportunities (Kerns, et al., 2014). These community partnerships broaden and deepen the academic experiences of students by allowing them to work on real-world projects, through curriculum-based and service learning opportunities, collaborating with nonprofit and community leaders as they seek to achieve their missions. From these relationships, the university and professor is set to receive positive publicity, stronger community support, and the potential for grant money from a variety of funding sources in the United States and internationally.

This individual model works in any classroom, but specifically fits well with courses in project management, tourism, message design, creative endeavors, and even theory courses. The strengths of service learning come from teaching students to be accountable for what they are doing (Cress, et al., 2013). This approach also works in both liberal arts and professional degree programs. Students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels could complete these projects. However, these projects should be meaningful and thoughtful, and address real community needs. These projects provide real world experience that is integrated with student growth as scholars, future practitioners and future leaders of the United States and countries around the world. The participation in collaboration projects between students, faculty, and the community is extremely vital to student education and for the faculty member. Kerns and Shelton (2014) find that these projects need to be planned out stage by stage, with a clear link to course materials. Class time should be set aside or reflection, on behalf of the students, to understand the link to educational content and curricula (Kerns, et al., 2014). For example, students could be asked about their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of working with a community organization, or if and how engaging in community projects affected their learning experience in the class. In this way, the students and faculty are involved not in isolation or in addition to classroom obligations but as a part of teaching and closely associated with professional learning.

Below are six additional basic guidelines to successfully implement community engagement projects/service learning into classroom (Kerns, et al., 2014):

1. Have an application process (paper or online);

2. Set clear expectations within your syllabus/ handbook, for students;

3. Provide clear learner outcomes on student - client relationship for the client and students;

4. Create a client contract or memo of understanding signed by all parties involved;

5. Set aside time in class for a self reflection component for students to identify the benefit of working with community, and to be able to ask questions;

6. Reinforce common sense for students: Be professional (attire, speech, electronic communication), meet deadlines, know your target publics, work well within groups, ability to multitask etc.

Students have been found to appreciate the engagement opportunities after the fact. Reflection questions often yield responses such as "when working with the community we are able to make

a difference and see our work in affect" (Kerns & Shelton 2014). Classes with community engagement opportunities are noted for emphasizing critical thinking and personal reflection while encouraging a sense of community participation in civic engagement and personal responsibility (Cress, et al., 2013). Students also report "feeling great to be at a university that produces professionals who will go out to the world and use their knowledge and skills to help people" (Kerns & Shelton 2014).

Professors that create community engagement opportunities in their courses, emphasize how crucial it is to engage in our local communities because they depend on institutions of higher education just as institutions depend on them. Service-learning components are an important tool for learning how to take a thoughtfully informed and rational approach to living and working in community that is tempered by active empathy, respect, and care (Cress, et al., 2013).

It is important to note that one department, or even one faculty member, who supports community engagement and service learning, and introduces it within his or her discipline, begins the first step to a university-wide commitment.

Institutional Implementation

A second way of creating these key town-gown relationships is by the creation of a Community Partnership Center in your department or institution. A community partnership center could provide project-based assistance to nonprofit organizations, municipalities, government agencies in low and moderate-income communities in the United States and internationally. One such program, at Roger Williams University (RWU) in the U.S. has as its mission, "to undertake and complete projects that will benefit the local community, while providing RWU students with experience in real-world projects that deepen their academic experiences" (2015). In this way the community partnership center draws upon the skills and experiences of students and faculty from university academic programs in areas such as: English and American Studies, Mass Media Communication and Advertising, Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies, Department of Pedagogy and School Psychology, Information Technology, Archeology, Journalism, Folk Studies, and Museum Studies. The services provided by this partnership would normally not be available to these organizations due to their cost and/or diverse needs. Another example is the Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership (CCEL) at the University of Maryland. Created in 2004, the CCEL is comprised of university programs that have joined in common purpose to promote the integration of civic engagement and leadership into the educational experience of the university's students. Consistent with the mission of the University of Maryland, the purpose of CCEL is to enhance the education of students to become civically engaged citizens, scholars, and leaders in communities on campus and in the state, the nation, and the world. CCEL consists of a Steering Committee and subcommittees of faculty, staff, and students. It reports jointly to the Vice President for Student Affairs and the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost.

A center should, at its onset, have a dedicated person coordinating university efforts to send out fluid, integrated information to the faculty about what this center does and how it can help the instructor in both in class and out of class projects. The coordinator should also be responsible

for two-way communication with various organizations in the community, to explain how this center will benefit them.

According to Roger Williams University (2015), five goals of the center and the coordinator should be:

1. Provide a standardized system for soliciting appropriate projects with qualified community partners and efficiently synthesizing those projects with academic programs.

2. Provide well-organized and educationally valid real world experience for undergraduate and graduate students

3. Provide trans-disciplinary opportunities for faculty/student collaboration on project-based activities, linking the classroom with the community.

4. Provide multi-disciplinary assistance to communities and organizations on real projects.

5. Create and maintain strong, functional, long-term relationships with community and government partners.

Educators from all institutes of higher education must commit their resources, which include facilities, finances, faculty expertise, as well as the energy, idealism, and intelligence of their students, to service learning. For those educators and institutions that are willing to institutionalize community engagement, the result is a revitalized institution and a renewed energy for teaching and learning (Cress, et al., 2013).

CONCLUSION

Service learning and community engagement partnerships are a benefit to students, faculty, institutions, and community partners, in the United States and around the world. Unfortunately, not all institutions utilize service learning to help their students gain vital experiences and skills necessary to advance themselves in their professional endeavors, while being more involved in their communities. This paper shared some of the benefits of service learning, identified commonly perceived difficulties in implementing service learning, offered solutions on how to overcome such difficulties, and finally provided real suggestions to begin implementing service learning, either individually or institutionally.

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