Service-Learning in One State: Results of the North Carolina Service-Learning Inventory

by Diane C. Calleson, Lani G. Parker, and Robert C. Serow

RECENT YEARS HAVE SEEN GREATLY expanded interest in service-learning among educators at both the K–12 and college levels. By most accounts, the initiation of service-learning programs and courses has come about in response to a recognized need to provide more effective citizenship education and to do a better job of preparing young people to be active members of their communities (see, for example, Barber). What is less clear, however, is the overall shape and substance of these programs. Because service-learning usually has a strong local component, not very much is known of the broader patterns and trends at the national and state levels.

One of the most promising sources for such information is from the Commissions on National and Community Service established in each of the fifty states by the National and Community Service Trust Act, enacted by Congress in 1993. As bipartisan bodies appointed by the governors, the state commissions are responsible for developing statewide plans for service-learning and identifying programs to be funded under the provisions of the federal law. A related duty that some commissions are assuming is to serve as clearinghouses for ideas and information pertaining to service-learning and other types of voluntary service. One example of this type of activity is the statewide inventory of service-learning sponsored by the North Carolina Commission on National and Community Service, where a three-person team from North Carolina State University was asked to provide a detailed profile of current service-learning activities throughout the state.

By summarizing the main findings and conclusions of the North Carolina inventory at both the higher education and K–12 levels, we hope to provide a basis for contact and collaboration across state lines and thus to contribute to the continued growth of the service-learning movement for a wider audience.

Scope and Method: On both the K–12 and higher education versions of the inventory, service-learning was defined as the integration of students' service activities into the school or college curriculum. Specific items were adapted with permission from the Campus Compact Members Survey. It is useful to conceive of the content of both surveys in terms of three sets of questions: goals, implementation, and evaluation and other follow-up activities. (Additional details about survey construction and content can be found in Serow, Calleson, Parker, and Morgan.)

We began the data collection process by mailing one copy of the appropriate form to each of the state's 118 institutions of higher education (IHEs) and to all 1177 public and private schools offering education at the middle or high school levels. After one additional round of follow-up mailings and telephone calls, responses were received from 82 IHEs (70% of those contacted). Overall response rates were higher among the four-year colleges and universities (80%) than among the two-year institutions (61%). The rate of response was much lower at the K–12 level (23%, or 272 schools) — apparently a reflection of the comparative scarcity of service-learning programs in these schools.

One further step in gathering the desired data was to conduct brief telephone interviews with respondents at a number of institutions where service-learning appeared to be flourishing. Among the IHEs, these individuals were usually service-learning coordinators or other officials in the department of student affairs; among the middle and high schools, contacts included teachers, administrators, and parent volunteers. The information obtained from these loosely structured conversations sheds further light on the implementation of service-learning activities and thus helps to amplify some of the results emerging from the statistical tabulations.

Findings: Given the volume of data to be reported, it will be helpful to present the results separately for each level of education. In each instance, we will follow the three-part classification system mentioned earlier: goals, implementation, and evaluation/follow-up.

Higher Education: With respect to *goals*, responding institutions generally identified student development as the most important intended outcome of service-learning courses and programs, followed by service to the community. Within the rubric of student development, responses varied among social/ethical/religious development, career preparation, academics, and personal development, with no one pattern clearly dominating the others.

The *implementation* of service-learning programs was found to be proceeding at all 43 of the four-year institutions but at only 25 of the 39 two-year colleges. Thus, more than one out of three responding community or junior colleges stated that they had no program in operation. Other implementation findings concerned the types of service-learning projects undertaken by students (teaching or mentoring youth, housing/homelessness/hunger, and caring for the elderly were the most popular options), the number of hours invested by students (typically, one to three hours per week), the number of faculty teaching service-learning courses or modules (five or fewer was the most common response), the lack of service-learning training for faculty (only 13 institutions made such training available), and the various types of support offered for service-learning by institutions (those mentioned most often

were awards, publicity, or campus or club service requirements; interestingly, the option least often chosen was including faculty involvement in service-learning as a criterion for promotion and tenure).

Finally, colleges and universities also provided information about *evaluation and other follow-up activities*. The form of evaluation most often utilized was evaluation by service recipients or collaborating agencies, followed by student self-evaluation and conferences with the instructor. Also worth noting in this respect is that local agencies are often consulted by campuses in assessing the need for service activity and in the design of these projects.

K–12 Schools: Middle and high school respondents paralleled their counterparts in higher education by choosing various aspects of student development as the key *goals* for service-learning. Especially important were social responsibility (cited by 79%), self-esteem (60%), interpersonal skills (59%), and leadership training (58%).

In the area of *implementation*, one surprising finding had to do with recruitment. While 70% of respondents said that students participated as individual volunteers or as members of clubs, 15% mentioned that service-learning was mandated as part of a juvenile court proceeding. Another 4% cited a school-wide service requirement. In sum, nearly one-fifth of student participation was not voluntary. (By comparison, only three of the responding higher education institutions cited non-voluntary factors, such as an institutional service requirement, as a significant recruitment factor.) The most popular types of service-learning projects were work in hospitals or nursing homes, cross-age tutoring and mentoring, recycling, and food banks. The most common forms of institutional support provided by schools or local school districts included generating ideas for service projects, curriculum integration, conducting community needs assessment, and orientation to service-learning philosophy. Significantly, however, only the first of these was chosen by as many as one-third of all respondents, while the others each were mentioned by only one in five.

As was also true in the IHEs, *evaluation and follow-up* take a relatively low-key form, with only 20% of schools naming graded evaluation by the instructor; as in the colleges and universities, self-evaluation, agency/client evaluations, reflection, and conferencing with the instructor were generally the preferred approaches. Asked to identify service-learning's greatest need, 45% of the schools mentioned funding, 24% chose staff support, and 18% named community involvement.

Conclusions: At this point, it is impossible to say how closely service-learning in North Carolina reflects the experience of other states. Yet, some of our findings stand out so clearly as to suggest that they may be part of broader trends.

■ Judging by the differential responses and response rates, service-learning programs and courses are universally available at four-year institutions of higher education, but are somewhat less in evidence in the community and junior colleges.

■ Although our data make it difficult to generalize accurately about the situation in middle and high schools, service-learning appears to be offered in only a minority of these institutions.

■ Despite the concern expressed by many educators about the need for civic education and community-mindedness, the day-to-day aims of service-learning at both the higher education and K–12 levels have more to do with individual development than with citizenship or community.

■ Although service-learning is gaining visibility and acceptance, institutional support often takes the form of symbolic rather than tangible incentives. Among IHEs, the implementation of service-learning seems to depend on a small group of supporters; in the middle and high schools, additional resource deployment is a key issue.

■ Evaluation and follow-up represent a mixed bag of results. On the plus side, schools and colleges are effectively integrating community agencies into these parts of the service-learning process; yet the relatively loose approach to evaluation found at most institutions suggests that service-learning continues to be perceived as a somewhat peripheral activity.

The statewide picture of service-learning in North Carolina therefore is one of substantial but uneven accomplishments. The most pressing priority is clearly for a downward extension of the service-learning movement from the four-year colleges and universities to the community and junior colleges and to the middle and high schools. A key factor in the realization of this goal will be the willingness of experienced service-learning educators to share their knowledge with those sectors presently underserved. With this in mind, it is encouraging to note that a number of organizations, particularly NSEE and its partners in its National Initiative program, are providing the means whereby such collaboration may occur.

References:

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Diane C. Calleson is a doctoral student in Education Research and Policy Analysis at North Carolina State University (NCSU), Raleigh, and an intern at the North Carolina Commission on National and Community Service, and at the Public Service Roundtable for the University of North Carolina System. Lani G. Parker is a doctoral student in Education Research and Policy Analysis at NCSU and an intern with the National Initiative for Leadership and Institutional Effectiveness. Robert C. Serow is a professor in the Department of Adult and Community College Education at NCSU, and a member of the North Carolina Commission on National and Community Service.

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