

Spring 1998

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Recommended Citation

Ottenritter, Nan and Lisman, C. David, "Weaving Service-Learning Into the Fabric of Your College" (1998). *Higher Education*. Paper 41.

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Weaving Service-Learning Into the Fabric of Your College

by Nan Ottenritter and C. David Lisman

Institutionalizing service-learning can be a rich and complex process. The following ideas about sustainability are offered as points to keep in mind as we go about getting service-learning programs more solidly grounded within our institutions. We've organized our ideas into the following categories: institutional mission, faculty outcomes, student outcomes, community impact, coordination of services, and advancement of the field. Most topics are accompanied by a checklist and "thought prompts." The checklist provides a guide for improving service-learning programs from the perspective of many different constituencies across an institution. The thought prompts are key words that frequently surface in discussions about institutionalization. They could serve as ideas for action, memory prompts, or discussion starters.

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People can be categorized as red-light, yellow-light, and green-light people. When faced with the possibility of change, their personalities become apparent. Green-light people embrace change. Yellow-lights are cautious, but open. Red-light people are change-stoppers.

Those of us who work in experiential education, generally, and in service-learning in particular, know these people. These red-light, yellow-light, and green-light people are our colleagues: staff, administrators, faculty, students, and community partners. We deal with them daily as we strive to make service-learning an integral part of the campus community. We can oftentimes predict their reactions, and they, ours. Knowing all of this, how can we become effective change agents in our colleges and universities?

The following ideas can help you assess your campus and provide important points of intervention for your service-learning efforts. Each campus is unique. Yet each campus is similar in that it contains a core of individuals who care deeply about their students, their work, and their campus community. Feel free to hand-tailor these suggestions to your particular situation. Find that core and then proceed outward as you go about institutionalizing and sustaining service-learning on your campus.

Institutional Mission

Service-learning is a significant movement in higher education. It is sound teaching pedagogy, combining the best features of experiential education, critical thinking, different ways of knowing, personal responsibility, and civic engagement. As the service-learning movement "grows up" it is faced with different developmental tasks. Key among these is institutionalization, or the ability to sustain itself.

Sharon Rubin (Jacoby, 1996) states: "The institutionalization of service-learning in American higher education is more likely now than in the 1960s and 1970s because many colleges and universities have learned from the past and have become more collaborative and creative in developing programs that are

directly tied to the mission and the culture of their institutions" (p. 314). Reference to the importance of our colleges contributing to the improvement of community life usually exists somewhere in the institutional statement of mission and purpose. If you have not done so already, sit down with your instructional dean and college president and visit with them over this matter. Do your homework ahead of time. Read your college's mission statement. Then discuss ways that you believe service-learning can provide a way for the college to carry out its mission. If you discover that service-learning does not fit into the mission statement, then raise the question whether the college should look at amending the statement.

In addition to a mission statement, many colleges have current goals or values they are attempting to infuse into the life of the institution. These often reflect the college's priorities and can be found in documents such as strategic plans; they can also be linked to specific educational initiatives. Determine whether your college has, is developing, or is revising such a document. Point out ways that you believe service-learning can help the college operationalize its goals and values. For example, if your college is currently placing a high priority on diversity, have students work with people unlike them (whether in the community or as student peers). If workforce development is a key initiative, point out how students can effectively use service-learning as a way to explore career options. A word of warning must be made here: this linking of service-learning to other initiatives should never be at the expense of academic integrity, the learning goals of the student, or the self-determination of the community.

Colleges also offer many programs that conform to professional as well as college standards; nursing programs are the most obvious example. These programs respond to a continuum of professional review from outright licensure to program accreditation to simple recommendations. Service-learning can be a pedagogy that enables a program to integrate the attainment of these standards with the culture of the program and, ultimately, the college.

Does your college have a culture of service? How would you know if it does? Consider the following: To have a service culture, service would be integrated, woven, and blended, both conceptually and operationally, within the fabric of the institution. Conceptually, service-learning could be tied to goals, objectives, and values, as discussed. It would also be found in the language and the discussions of all of the stakeholders in the culture. Operationally, service would be built into the *processes* of the college. Some colleges require students to complete a certain number of service hours before they graduate. Scholarship programs like the Bonner program award money to students who pledge to perform service. Service could be a part of promotion/tenure processes. It could claim a place in re-accreditation. Reward systems would recognize and honor service. Catalogues and course schedules would acknowledge it. Computers would house data about it. Co-curricular transcripts would reflect it.

The importance of connecting service-learning to your college's mission, strategic plan, educational initiatives, and programs cannot be understated. Connecting programs with mission and goals is typically the way a college president and other administrative leaders determine the level of funding commitment. For many of us, our service-learning programs started mainly by getting some faculty and students interested in this initiative. We typically received specialized, limited funding for some faculty to integrate service-learning into their courses. These were short-term strategies designed to introduce and familiarize faculty, staff, and students with a new pedagogy. But long-term survival depends upon tying the project to the college's mission, plans, initiatives and programs, and to the college's structure.

In preparing for a meeting with your president and other key administrative leaders, you should not only review the college's statement of mission and goals, but you should also review the faculty, student, and community outcomes associated with service-learning. Be prepared to relate these outcomes to program-specific goals as well as institution-wide goals. Share this information with your college leaders in this visit.

Checklist:

1 Review your college's mission statement, strategic plan, funded initiatives, and program accreditation processes. Together with relevant stakeholders, discuss and implement service-learning strategies that support and reinforce the activities, goals, and values imbedded in each.

2 Review the processes in place at your college. Is service a part of the promotion process for all employees? At graduation, when students are singled out for their achievements, is there recognition for service to the community? Get service "on the table" as an important topic for discussion.

Thought prompts: advisory boards, public relations, networking, course competencies, student services, recognition and celebrations, accreditation, conference presentations, team approach, student services, activity fees.

Faculty Outcomes

Evaluations of faculty involvement in service-learning have ranged from simple tracking of the numbers of faculty participating in service-learning, to faculty satisfaction surveys, to qualitative data gathered at faculty trainings and roundtables. At this

point the focus is primarily on the faculty's satisfaction and ease with using service-learning as a teaching pedagogy rather than as an actual performance. Capture as much information as you can in order to share it with faculty, administrative staff, boards of trustees, and constituents. This information could also be mailed to the entire college faculty or presented during faculty orientation. Arrange for a faculty development workshop in which key service-learning faculty present to other faculty concerning the implementation of service-learning in their courses.

Why take such measures? The answers are many and varied. Faculty are key to the mission of the college. In the best spirit of academic freedom and respect for their expertise, they must be included in the developing, shaping, and "fine tuning" of any teaching pedagogy. As citizens of the college community, they must be included in the campus civic process that shapes their work lives. As "front line" workers, they are aware of the pressures and forces that shape our students. And as skilled professionals, they embrace opportunities for renewal. As such, their impressions need to be held up to themselves for their own professional development. They also need to be held up to the college community as "grist for the mill," as the college goes about fulfilling its mission.

It is also important to put service-learning in context. Collection of institution-specific data is important to the identity and growth of the institution. However, institutions engaged in service-learning are also part of a larger educational movement. Any trainings should also include data taken from research studies and nationally-directed studies such as those done by the RAND for the Corporation for National Service (Gray, 1996), the National Center for Education Statistics (Nolin, 1997), and Brandeis University's Center for Human Resources (final report to be completed early 1998)

Checklist:

1 List ways in which you have involved faculty in service-learning over the past two years (There's no magic about the number two here.) How would you assess the institution's support for faculty training and implementation of service-learning?

2 Have you given specific faculty information on their implementation of service-learning? If so, how? For example, has feedback about service-learning gleaned in individual faculty evaluations been presented to faculty members?

3 List some new kinds of promotional and ongoing support activities that you could do this coming academic year to involve new faculty in service-learning and enrich the skills of those currently involved.

4 List the ways you can disseminate this data to all relevant constituencies.

Thought prompts: resource handbooks, syllabi, training institutes, learning circles, mini-grants, stipends, faculty senate, orientation, academic rigor, reflection activities, pre-and post class assessments.

Student Outcomes

What are the student outcomes? Similar to faculty outcomes, common measurements include numbers of students involved in service-learning, service hours completed, student satisfaction,

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comparisons of service-learning experimental and control groups, and impact on students' civic lives. Assemble journals and class projects. Summarize comments you have heard from students regarding the impact of service-learning. Conduct pre- and post-course measurements. Share this material in visits with college administrators, the faculty senate, boards of trustees, student government clubs, and student services personnel. Have students themselves present to college groups and become co-presenters in outside presentations.

Why take these measures? Students are the recipients of services, the consumers: their voices need to be heard. They are citizens of the college community and must be included in the civic process that shapes their lives. They also can be the most passionate and convincing advocates for service-learning. Their minds and hearts lie close to the experience; they not only witness their learnings but also recreate in a listener the excitement and joy of learning.

Checklist:

1 List ways in which you have involved students in service-learning over the past two years (Again, there's no magic about the number two here.) Include not only actual courses with service-learning components, but also orientations for students, recruitment activities, visibility of service-learning in registration materials, etc. How would you assess the institution's support for students' involvement in service-learning?

2 Have you evaluated student performance in service-learning? If so, how? Has feedback about service-learning been presented to students both in individual and aggregate form?

3 List some new kinds of promotional and ongoing support activities that you could do this coming academic year to involve students in service-learning. Be sure to include promotional, evaluation, and management activities.

4 List the ways you can disseminate this data to all relevant constituencies.

Thought prompts: orientation, student ambassadors, reflection groups, fourth-credit option, advocates, recognition and celebration, transcripts, teams.

Community Impact

For many of us, obtaining information about community impact is the weakest link in our work. Nevertheless, survey what kinds of information you have along these lines, and then fill in the gaps. Visit with directors of some key community-based organizations and ask them focused questions regarding their assessment of the value of service-learning. This visit could also be used to determine whether there are specific projects you might plan for your college with the agency. Again, you need to share this information with administrators, faculty, and students.

Checklist:

1 Meet with community members. Together, list the kinds of information you have regarding community impact, e.g. community member stories, agency staff impressions and evaluations, services provided by students, etc. Then list the infor-

mation you would like to have.

2 In regard to the information you do have, decide if you would like to disseminate that information. If so, decide upon the purpose and manner of disseminating the information, addressing the audience, and deciding on the method of presentation (report, film, and student writings).

3 In regard to the information you and your community partners would like to gain, decide on ways to gather and disseminate such information.

4 Demonstrate how both categories of information can be linked to the action/planning process that shapes future collaborations.

Thought prompts: orientation, advisory boards, focus groups, PR, partnerships, local culture, connection with other initiatives, resource handbooks, service scholarships.

Coordination of Services

Colleges typically have different mechanisms for developing community placement sites, coordinating student placements, assisting faculty, and managing/evaluating the whole process. The most obvious mechanism would be a centralized service-learning office. Typically such offices are staffed with a combination of college personnel, work study students, and, sometimes, AmeriCorps members. Others operate a service-learning program through a volunteer center. These volunteer centers can serve as clearinghouses for volunteer and service-learning opportunities, being sure to keep the two distinct. Still other colleges have decentralized systems, with students identifying their own sites and individual faculty managing the whole placement process. The Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) describes a "Coalition of Projects" model in which student leaders coordinate and manage all aspects of the project. In all cases, the actual structure of the management process should clearly "fit" the campus. Beyond that, however, the structure is not nearly as important as the accomplishment of certain specific tasks and the spirit the players bring to the work.

Specific tasks to be accomplished include: developing placement sites and providing ongoing training for community site personnel; developing a cadre of faculty willing to use service-learning and providing ongoing training and support for them; monitoring student placements; ensuring a mutually satisfactory relationship with community-based organizations and other service sites personnel; and providing for continuous quality refinement of the service-learning program. The interconnections of all of these tasks (which many times can seem quite bureaucratic) are the need to identify and "grow" people. The joy of learning from experience needs to be honored, reinforced, and celebrated not only among the students, but among the very people who serve them: center and administrative staff and faculty.

Checklist:

1 Together, with all relevant stakeholders, define "good coordination" of a service-learning program. Then assess your own. Be sure to acknowledge and celebrate what is going well with your coordination efforts. Then identify areas in need of improvement.

2 Develop an action plan to improve your program. Be sure to identify the resources needed to accomplish these improve-

ments. If these resources are people, time, or money, how do you plan to obtain them?

Thought prompts: placement office, advisory board, coordination, projects, student services, computer databases, forms, handbooks, letters of agreement, accountability, tasks, communication, service-learning director.

Advancement of the Field

Marketing

Going through all these time-consuming tasks provides you with the resources you need, in order to present your service-learning program clearly and accurately to the public. If you have not done so, this would be a good time to develop a service-learning brochure in which you can include excerpts from all of the information you have developed in the above areas. Also, a video that captures service activity and participant stories can be powerful. Get to know your institution's public relations director, and think about where service-learning stories might be placed in the media. Acknowledge and celebrate everyone who has been a part of the service-learning program, including students, recipients of service, faculty, administrators, and community partners.

Research and Publishing

An often overlooked form of marketing in academia is research and publishing. While the primary purpose of such activities is not marketing per se, an important consequence of such activity is simply "getting the word out" about effective teaching pedagogy and strategies. Dialogue about service-learning in any type of journal brings service "to the table" and increases its visibility. Any research that can confirm or deny the assumptions we hold contributes enormously to the field of education and, ultimately, to the good of our students. This dialogue and information contribute to the "public good" of education.

Clarifying Our Commitment to Service-Learning

As educators, administrators, and citizens of our academic and larger communities, we attach different values to service-learning. These different values usually surface over reasons for using service-learning as pedagogy and the resulting outcomes. Service-learning is a teaching pedagogy: it should be used with choice and intentionality. In our culture, teachers are to a great degree, free to use the pedagogics they wish. Many of us teach to our past, and to our own learning styles. Assuming the maturity that allows us all to move above and beyond our pasts and ourselves, teachers should be free to choose when and how to use service-learning. While the authors believe there are very few instances in which it would not be appropriate, teachers will choose when and where they will use service-learning (Lisman, 1997). To aid in making that choice, it is useful to think of the reasons for using service-learning on a continuum. At one end we see the attainment of course competencies; in the middle we see civic literacy; at the opposing end we see social transformation. Embedded in this continuum are certain "models." Common ones in this field are the charity, citizenship, and justice models. The charity approach emphasizes promoting an ethic of community service. The citizenship model focuses on helping

students learn how to become more adept at seeking solutions to social problems through the democratic process. The justice approach attempts to help students become more aware of and committed to rectifying social injustices.

One of the tasks we might be more intentional about is reflecting on the reasons we choose to use service-learning in the first place. What kinds of commitments do our service-learning efforts imply? How are they reflections of ourselves and our identities as educators? When we become clearer about our own investment in the service-learning movement, we are better able to discuss how our personal values and styles as educators can help transform our college communities. We are also better able to hear opposing comments and use all thoughts to advance the field.

Clarifying Our Commitment to Engagement

Ernest Boyer wrote on the concept of public scholarship. This concept embraces the notion of community research. It involves engaged scholarship in which students and faculty work together with community-based organizations in an attempt to develop projects to improve community life. Do community-based organizations set the agenda? Do college representatives work as partners helping members of these organizations realize their goals? If we are to serve truly as reciprocal partners in the community, we must be willing to partner and serve alongside each other. Certainly, the academy has great intellectual capital to bring to bear in providing solutions to community problems and in helping build on community assets to improve community life. Certainly the community has a richness of culture and wisdom that can inform not only its members, but particularly those whose task it is to gather knowledge formally and create solutions.

Reciprocity can only occur between colleges and community organizations if power and its relations are made a topic of discussion. Power dynamics inevitably surface and need clarification in any human interaction. Whose gifts are to be used where? Who has control over them? Which end is being served and who determines that end? Any endeavor that calls us into interaction with others holds the key for clarification of power issues. And the clarification of power issues resulting from the tussles, pain, and, yes, joy of interacting on such a level is what makes common ground possible.

Many would simply prefer not to bring the issues of power to the table. After all, many of us have probably worked quite hard to bring service-learning to the table. Why, then muddy the picture? The reason is that common ground is forged out of that mud. It is formed through asserting oneself, listening to others, interacting with integrity and good will, acknowledging all of the variables that impact upon human interactions, and coming to some resolution. When common ground is created, we can work for the common good. Can one perform an isolated act for the common good? Most assuredly 'yes.' Yet the synergistic effect of creating a product for the common good through a *process* that honors the common good is truly transformative.

Robert Putnam's (1995) now classic essay, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," has provided us with a powerful service-learning metaphor. Do we want to bowl alone or with others? There are benefits with either situation. Yet there is so much value added to the experience when we do not bowl

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alone: value for ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities. We believe that service-learning proponents know this. And these added values of mutual respect, caring, and personal responsibility leading to civic engagement are, paradoxically, what we use to create what we're hoping to become.

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