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Research Notes

by Andrew Furco

The Use of Grand Assessments in K–12 Service-Learning Research

Findings from most studies on the impacts of service-learning on K–12 students tend to be based on one assessment tool focusing on one construct (e.g., self-esteem, civic participation, etc.). While conventional research wisdom tells us that this approach is more statistically stable, it does not seem to be adequate for studying service-learning programs. Both service-learning and experiential education researchers face several dilemmas in determining the effects of service-learning activities on students' educational development. The idiosyncratic nature of the program activities, the lack of well-tested assessment instruments, the confounding influences on students' learning, etc., make service-learning research a challenging and difficult endeavor. Several researchers are grappling with these dilemmas by inventing new assessment tools and creative practices that attempt to get at the core issues of service-learning in K–12 education. An increasing number of researchers are relying on grand assessments, using a selective collection of methodologies and assessment instruments, to capture the full range of potential outcomes. Here are reports of two such research studies.

The Evaluation System for Experiential Education (ESEE) was designed by researchers at the Service-Learning Research and Development Center at the University of California at Berkeley as a means both to capture the idiosyncrasies of individual programs and generate standardized data that allowed for comparisons across programs. As a grand assessment tool, it consists of a battery of quantitative and qualitative measures: a standardized attitudinal pre-/post-survey, a series of eight sequential journal questions, focus-group interview protocols, teacher and community-based organization questionnaires, and student field placement. The quantitative pre-/post-survey, measuring student development in six domains (academic, vocational, personal, social, civic, and ethical), allows for comparisons to be made across projects, classrooms, programs, schools,

and districts. The qualitative journals and interviews allow the researcher to explore more fully the nature of individual programs. The qualitative data is used to support or not support the quantitative findings. This triangulation of the data sources allows for stronger assertions about the program findings.

ESEE has been used with over 1,200 students in 14 school districts in California. In a recent study conducted by UC-Berkeley, the results indicated that in one program, a number of high school students who tutored middle school students in history and other subjects gained in ethical development (n=74, p=.0005) and civic responsibility (n=77, p=.0001) as measured by the pre-/post-attitudinal survey. The items for ethical development focused on developing values toward helping to better oneself and others and making decisions between right and wrong (alpha=.68). The civic responsibility items measured students' attitudes towards civic participation and volunteerism (alpha=.64). These findings were supported by the qualitative data in students' journal entries and interview responses, as well as interview responses from teachers and community members about students' work. Perhaps the most interesting findings from the use of ESEE's grand assessment technique is that there are often many unintended goals. *For more information contact Andrew Furco, Service-Learning Research and Development Center, UC-Berkeley, 510-642-3199.*

Grand assessment techniques are also being utilized in a study underway at the Pennsylvania Service-Learning Resource and Evaluation Network at the University of Pittsburgh. The study uses a multi-phased approach — a variety of quantitative and qualitative data sources including a program profile, pre-/post-forms required by the Corporation for National Service, site visits, and interviews. While the Corporation forms are used to gauge quantitative data in program development, the profile captures other quantitative and qualitative data — the degree of integration of service into the curriculum, the financial and administrative support received, the level of student involvement

in decision-making processes, the nature of service activities, among other issues — which facilitate cross-program or multi-site comparisons. Each programmatic issue within the profile, along with supportive data from site visits and teacher, student, administrator, and advisory board interviews, helps determine a program's position on a *volunteerism/ community service/service-learning* continuum. Because the continuum facilitates the categorization of service programs across a variety of domains, it provides a means to conduct comparative analyses among different service program types.

The first phase of the University of Pittsburgh study, focusing on developing an overall picture of Pennsylvania's K–12 service-learning programs, was just completed. They found that throughout the state, there is a high level of integration of service into existing curriculum; and the longer a program has been in operation, the greater the number of students it involves and the stronger are its collaborations among participants. Both findings are likely to serve as important criteria for determining the methodologies and protocols that will be used in phase two of the study, which will focus on assessing the impact of service-learning on a variety of student outcomes including retention rates, grade point averages, attendance, and student behavior, among other social, personal, and academic factors. *For more information contact Carl Fertman or Yolanda Yugar at the Pennsylvania Service-Learning Resource and Evaluation Network, University of Pittsburgh, 412-648-7196.*

The grand assessments, among other methodologies for assessing service-learning outcomes for K–12 programs, will be discussed in a new book by Alan Waterman of Trenton State University, due out in late 1997.

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