Learning from Service-Learning

Sherril B. Gelmon, Guest Editor

This volume of "Lessons from Service-Learning" includes reports from a diverse group of studies with implications for how we in higher education think about the role of service-learning and comparable curricular strategies—for various levels of learners, types of institutions, academic purposes, and future professions and employment settings. The issues raised in these articles reinforce what we already know about the state of research on service-learning—that it is rapidly increasing (as evidenced by the significant growth in number and quality of presentations at the International Service-Learning Research conferences), but we also can see that many questions remain to be addressed. Critics of service-learning research raise concerns about the quality of methods, the scope of the topics addressed, and the breadth of experience and reference frameworks that serve as the foundations for current research. This set of papers shares lessons and findings from recent studies, and also suggests further areas of research that need to be addressed.

In particular, the articles introduce some evidence of experimentation with different methods and perspectives on aspects of service-learning in K–12 and higher education settings. These experiments help to push the notion of what constitutes formal research and should help to expand our notion of what is appropriate for and relevant to service-learning research. In turn, this can help to expand research, which then provides opportunities for further revelations about program quality and outcomes. Through this ongoing process we can build better understanding and dissemination of concepts of relevant research methods while also improving service-learning programs. As many of the articles in this volume demonstrate, this work is not about practices that can be studied exclusively using the rigid scientific methods of quantitative research—many of these practices are vested in "real-world" experiential activities, and lend themselves to qualitative developmental research practices that enable adaptation to changing environmental circumstances. There have been previous calls for "mixed" methods as the most appropriate strategies for much of the research on service-learning and investigations of broader concepts of civic engagement, and the articles in this volume reinforce those calls.

As pieces comprising an issue of *Metropolitan Universities*, all of the articles offer lessons for universities serving a predominantly urban population. However, the lessons are also relevant to other university contexts and to community colleges engaged in various kinds of service-learning programs. There are also two articles that report on service-learning in a K–12 context. While these do not directly address university issues, each offers insights about the nature of learning experiences students are having before they enter higher education. Given the increasing emphasis on service-learning in K–12 in many states, educators at the university/college level need to better understand the experiences students have had before they come to us, so that we may structure higher education service-learning programs that build upon these

previous experiences. We can then begin to develop a better understanding of learning across the continuum of education. There are many other valuable lessons and stories in this issue; some of these are highlighted here.

Service-Learning and Workforce Preparation

Ruth Brodsky introduces readers to the SCANS competencies (The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) and draws conclusions on the potential implications of her study for workforce development. SCANS was established to determine the skills that many employers expect employees to acquire before entering the work force—in fact, these are the skills and competencies that people need to succeed in the world of work. There are five competencies: (1) ability to manage resources; (2) interpersonal skills needed to work amicably and productively with others; (3) ability to acquire and use information; (4) skills needed to master complex systems; and (5) skills needed to work with technology.

As Brodsky illustrates, most of the skills and competencies in the SCANS report are comparable to the skills and competencies that students can develop through quality service-learning experiences. She develops a set of recommendations which have high potential relevance for higher education in terms of building greater linkages between K–12 and higher education service-learning experiences, and for better contextualizing service-learning experiences in terms of relevance for future workforce participation. Her recommendations include the following:

1. Replicate this study in other urban school districts and use the results to *(a)* contribute to the development of service-learning models that reflect employability skills; *(b)* generate more thought about the connection between academic learning and community-based and work-based experiences; and *(c)* create more educational programs that support students' transition to the work world.

2. Begin service-learning activities at the middle school level and continue through high school and into post-secondary institutions, using various models as relevant to the level of learner. As students advance through the grade levels, their employability skills should increase as their academic skills increase, and attention could be paid to the development of attitudes, competencies, and skills such civic awareness, social responsibility, empowerment, and increased self-esteem.

3. Train potential teachers at the college level to link academic learning with experiential service-learning and employability skills. Future teachers should be challenged to build competencies for the workforce into their teaching strategies, and they themselves should learn how to make contacts and linkages with businesses and organizations, and to create curricula that integrate competencies, community-based learning, and relevant content. Ongoing professional development should be created for teachers already in

practice to learn and build the connections between service-learning and employability skills.

4. Encourage partnerships between local businesses or community organizations and colleges or universities, with an emphasis on the anticipated benefit for employers of successful students who have the skills needed for the world of work.

Overall, Brodsky's work suggests the need to raise the profile of various competency frameworks, and tie their use to other higher education efforts to define and measure learning outcomes—not only content learning but also the relevant skills and abilities that build upon the knowledge developed and better prepare students for various experiences and expectations in employment settings.

Importance of Student Voice

Will Morgan and Matthew Streb offer some cautionary advice on the impact of service-learning, based on a study of high school students. They build upon the premise that service-learning is a vehicle to counteract civic apathy and to build more of a sense of citizen involvement and more active civic participation. Their premise was that when students participate in service-learning projects in which they feel they have ownership, they become more engaged in the classroom and also build an appreciation for civic values. Participants in the study were high school students from multiple classrooms in ten different schools in five states.

An important observation made by Morgan and Streb focuses on the variation in the content of various service-learning projects, in their organization and management, and in the extent of student involvement and student voice in shaping the project. Many faculty will argue that they need to retain control of the organization and management of the service-learning experience in order to ensure that it meets the academic goals of the course and helps students to achieve the anticipated learning outcomes (particularly when implementing service-learning in short time frames, such as in institutions on the quarter system or in shortened summer sessions). Despite this, Morgan and Streb argue strongly for the positive benefits that will accrue from active student voice. Their findings suggest that when programs give students little sense of ownership, these experiences may actually produce *negative* effects on the students' civic orientations.

The results of this study led the authors to observe that "Students in programs with little student voice become less likely to want to discuss school, to believe in the importance of hard work, and even less likely to show up to school!" While some may question whether this generalization can, in fact, be made, it nonetheless does suggest that at least in populations like the one studied here, there may be some negative correlations of experience with impact. Such findings need to be considered by university faculty in the context of their own environment, taking into account the nature of their students, the students' motivation to pursue higher education (a

voluntary choice *versus* a mandated activity—a different situation than for most high school students), the level of learner, and the nature of the service-learning activity—as well as the extent of student voice in the design and conduct of service-learning.

Morgan and Streb observe that participation in service-learning projects that limit student input may create resentment, making the project unlikely to change their civic values and unlikely to make them more excited and active in the classroom. They suggest that "students need to have real responsibilities, challenging tasks, help plan the project, and make important decisions in order for the project to have a positive influence." By giving students a voice in the project, they will feel they have accomplished something "real."

Is it always realistic to create space for the active student voice? Certainly to the extent feasible, any participant in an engagement project should have the opportunity to identify assets and needs, and to engage in negotiation to ensure that the community-based experience is mutually beneficial (for students, faculty, and community partners). However, in certain situations there may be constraints to engaging student voice to a great extent—so the lessons of this study are useful in helping to identify what might be viewed as an ideal and framing those lessons in the context of the practical.

Multiple Perspectives on Student Learning

Seanna Kerrigan, Sherril Gelmon, and Amy Spring report on the multiple perspectives of students, community members, and faculty to document the impact of student participation in service-learning courses. They studied ten variables in order to develop a broad understanding of the impact of service-learning from a variety of perspectives, and employed multiple assessment methods to explore the various impacts perceived by the different constituencies. These authors tested a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods of assessment in order to learn the contributions of the various methods with different constituent groups and for different purposes. A unique contribution of this paper is the scope of the research, which includes data from nearly 3,000 students over a five-year period.

Substantial evidence was generated to indicate that students made substantial gains in terms of their awareness of their communities and their involvement in those communities. Students reported learning about individuals, organizations, and previously unrecognized social issues to promote positive change in the community. They articulated how service-learning courses affected their self-awareness and personal development as they became more knowledgeable about their own strengths, skills, and interests. Students were consistent in their comments that service-learning gave them confidence in areas of their lives in which they had previously experienced insecurities, such as interpersonal skills, ability to communicate in professional settings, and capacity to interact effectively in collaborative team settings. Students articulated that they found new and more empowered role(s) as learners and a sense of ownership in these educational experiences. Students stated that this new role as

learner positively affected their learning in terms of relevance of academic content and in an enhanced ability to think critically to address real community issues.

Community partners were insightful regarding the attitudes of students, knowledge areas demonstrated by students, and the actual performance or product created by the students. They were able to articulate the quality of the student work and the interpersonal communication processes students engaged in to accomplish the service goal. They reported that students gained this awareness through direct service to clients and through engagement in organizational development efforts. The community saw this involvement and commitment in the performance of the students. Community partners reported that students demonstrated communication skills through formal presentations to executive boards and informal interactions with clients, and critical thinking skills through the process of "making important decisions." Several community partners identified that they observed students gaining a deeper understanding about the course content while learning about the complexity of problems that exist within communities.

Analysis of faculty-generated data confirmed the outcomes reported by students. Faculty reported students' enhanced awareness of community issues, observing how students move from questioning why they were required to perform community work to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the community work. Faculty observations of the lessons learned by the students centered on academic achievement, critical thinking, career development, self-awareness, and communication. Faculty reported a shift away from a "banking" method of education in which the aim is to deposit knowledge into students, toward a "constructivist" philosophy that encourages students to construct new knowledge and apply that knowledge in meaningful ways. Faculty stressed that the key learning in these courses was the empowerment of students in taking on new roles as learners and community problem-solvers. Although the personalities and teaching styles of the faculty involved varied greatly, in each case the faculty who incorporated service-learning into their courses changed their own roles in the classroom.

Kerrigan et al. demonstrate that the voices of all three constituencies improved the depth of insights into the impact of the service-learning experiences and enriched the quality of the data gathered. Students were able to provide their own perspectives on the skills and attitudes they developed as a result of their participation in the course. Community partners provided evidence of student learning in the field, and added valuable insights regarding the quality of student performance in and contribution to the community organization. Finally, faculty confirmed many of these findings when they described the environment that best facilitated the development of these skills, and reflected upon their own teaching strategies.

Developing a Service-Learning Minor

Scott Myers-Lipton examines efforts to develop a service-learning minor at a large western metropolitan university. The minor is intended as a way to integrate the fragmented efforts of the university, and to present students with a comprehensible plan to organize their community service-learning experience.

Two tracks were developed leading to the minor. The first was a general track composed of 18 units of service-learning courses, including Social Problems, Community Involvement and Personal Growth, and Community Action and Service. These courses were intended to provide students with an interdisciplinary understanding of the social issues underlying community service agency goals; tactics and strategies for social change; the connection among student culture, social class, gender, and ethnicity; and a hands-on service-learning experience.

The second track was for students wanting a more focused leadership training and community organizing emphasis leading to positions in social justice and non-profits. It was intended as a comprehensive service-learning program, designed to develop "scholar activists" who would learn how to analyze and solve community and global problems. This track incorporated a developmental process that allowed students to first understand themselves, and then move to applications addressing local, national, and international social justice concerns. Entitled International and National Voluntary Service Training (INVST), it involved four upper division courses and service-learning labs, six hours of community work per week, and two summer service experiences (domestic and/or international).

Student participants in the program study were a diverse group by level of learner, gender, and race/ethnicity. They offered insights on their experiences through completion of a survey and an in-depth interview; as a result, many of the findings are documented through rich first-person narratives and observations on the experiences. Three primary themes emerged from the findings:

1. Development of leadership roles and skills, including acquisition of a number of "tools" to use such as facilitation and conflict resolution;
2. Opportunity to explore multiculturalism and gain knowledge of diversity, through development of an understanding of ethnicity, racism, and privilege, over long-term experiences; and
3. Building a sense of community, both during the experiences and then upon return to campus, as evidenced by a greater commitment to individual participation in the life of the campus, an enhanced sense of responsibility to attend classes, and a sense of belonging.

Myers-Lipton builds upon these three themes to offer several lessons from this program for others. First, it is important to discuss the issue of racism explicitly so that students are able to deal with the emotions that surround it. The INVST program conducts an active listening exercise on the second day of the program, and gets

students to talk about their backgrounds early on. They also found that having a multi-ethnic faculty teaching in the program attracted students of color and helped them to feel comfortable in the classroom. A multicultural curriculum therefore includes not only content but also instructors and participants who are multicultural.

A second lesson relates to the workload of students and recognition of the other burdens working students may have, especially those who are struggling financially to stay in school. Programs may have to modify their duration and design to respond to student needs.

A third lesson relates to institutionalization, in order to have the financial and academic support of the university. Senior members of the faculty will the give the program recognition, and legitimacy in the eyes of the faculty, students, and administrators. Institutionalization makes it possible for the program to become a line item in the budget. Related to this is a fourth item of securing funding—particularly for the long-term. Myers-Lipton emphasizes the need to look beyond initial grant startup funds to secure the program's future.

Given the nature of the activities of the students in this program, another important lesson was identified relative to the respective roles of service and social change. Myers-Lipton observes that some students are interested in direct service, while others are interested in social change. Both can play a role in the transformation of society, but program leaders need to be attentive to balancing the interests of both students and faculty for common or diverging purposes.

Finally, Myers-Lipton offers a valuable insight regarding political activism and perceptions by the university administration of the benefits of the various activities in which students and faculty may be engaged. Some "activism" may be perceived by administrators as counter to institutional mission, and it is important to not place students in positions that may compromise their success at the institution. Similarly, such activities could compromise the long-term support of the program itself.

Service-Learning and Civic Engagement

Gary Daynes and Steve Wygant report findings from a study in which students followed a variety of pathways to civic engagement. In a course called "American Heritage," students pursued multiple paths to civic engagement—participation in a service-learning project, membership in voluntary associations, a media watch, or a study of foundational documents. Regardless of the project the students worked on, they all faced the same requirements. All students had to spend two hours per week on their project and report on their work in the weekly discussion section. They also completed spoken and written reflections that asked them to connect their citizenship project work to course content. At the end of the semester all students wrote a paper that described how they had understood citizenship before the class began, what they had learned about citizenship in class and in their project, and how they understood citizenship after completing the course.

Multiple forms of assessment were used, and a substantial number of the 2,200 students enrolled in the class completed all of the measurement instruments. The findings suggest that while service-learning is not necessarily more effective than other methods in influencing student attitudes about civic life, it does influence the way that students think citizens should act in a democracy. Several findings can inform future development of projects designed to promote civic engagement. These findings include:

- A demonstrated relationship between personal development and civic engagement suggests that teachers who draw out the connections between personal well-being and the well-being of others can deepen student engagement.
- Though a course that focuses on civic engagement can influence student views on civic life, service-learning does not necessarily appear to be a more effective pathway to civic engagement than membership in a voluntary association, following politics in the media, or reading foundational documents.
- Though no single citizenship project was more influential than the others, prior membership in some sort of civic organization had a significant influence on student attitudes.

Daynes and Wygant found that students who participated in civic engagement activities were less likely to spend time on-line or watching television than other students, and were more likely to have checked a book out from the library, signed a petition, or worked to care for the environment. They observe that these experiences may affect how students participate in civic life. Given some differences among the students related to the nature of their civic engagement activity, a resulting conclusion is that faculty can support the development of civic outcomes in students with a variety of pedagogies, of which service-learning is only one. This should not be interpreted as a negative observation on service-learning, but rather as a perspective that recognizes the range of strategies that are available through which civic engagement can be promoted—perhaps a less limiting approach than that advocated by those who only value service-learning as an acceptable pedagogy.

Daynes and Wygant make an important contribution by studying multiple forms of course-based engagement. They do recognize that there may be some limitations in the generalizability of their findings, given that the study was conducted at a large faith-based urban institution—but this should serve as encouragement to others to replicate their practices in other kinds of institutions and further contribute to our knowledge of the differential impacts on students of various kinds of curricular-based civic engagement activities.

The Impact of Stipends

Susan Root, Janet Eyler, and Dwight Giles present some intriguing information on the impact of a "stipended" service-learning program. They compare participants in the Bonner Scholars Program with other volunteers engaged in service-learning to determine the short- and long-term impacts on their attitudes and practices with respect to service-learning and community service. The Scholars were identified at several higher education institutions, while the volunteers who served as the comparison group were from the same institutions as those in the programs offering stipends and were nominated by their community service coordinator for high levels of volunteerism.

Little is known about the effects of financial rewards on the internalization of "an ethic" of community service, yet there probably exists a general assumption that selection into a special service-oriented program would have a positive impact on personal attitudes and beliefs. Programs such as the Bonner Scholars Program are created to provide access to college for those with financial need and to heighten the overall educational experience for these students by involving them in ongoing service work.

This study examined the short- and long-term effects of stipends on indicators that students had internalized an "ethic" of community service. Indicators selected as evidence of such an ethic were those which have been conceptually linked to long-term commitment to other prosocial behaviors and included motives for performing service, role identity as a community servant, citizenship, and behavioral commitment to service. Comparisons of Bonner Scholars with highly involved volunteers, and among Scholars with varying lengths of participation, revealed negative effects for stipended service on some measures of internalization, such as social obligation motives for service (rather than voluntary actions), financial motivations for participation, and a focus on individual misfortunes rather than underlying social problems. These negative effects appeared to increase with multiple years of stipend support.

These findings suggest that service programs in higher education should avoid linking payment to service. Instead, these programs need to build on participants' existing motives for service and their identity as socially responsible persons. If campus service programs do implement stipends for service, they should ensure that incentives are used in conjunction with experiences that heighten students' empathy and self-definitions as community servants. This finding suggests careful reconsideration of programs existing with stipends, as well as further study of participants, in order to better understand the impact of financial support on students who participate in sponsored service-learning programs.

Ethical Issues

Barbara Rich raises questions about the ethical conduct of service-learning. Faculty carefully consider ethical issues when conducting research or overseeing student research. Rich raises a series of important questions: What are the ethical obligations in service-learning when formal research is not being conducted? What norms and standards of personal and interpersonal behavior should be followed? How can the well-being of students be protected, as well as that of the people with whom they come into contact? How does one balance the risks and benefits of service-learning? Should there be ethical oversight committees for service-learning projects?

Rich's unit of analysis is an undergraduate social work class, in which students worked with foster children to create "lifebooks," which are a compilation of memorabilia that chronicles and validates a person's life—documentation of one's early life compiled and lovingly saved. She systematically addresses a number of issues that are always considered in developing a research protocol, but that may not be consistently identified (if at all) in the context of service-learning. These include consent to participate, the voluntary nature of the interactions, negotiation of arrangements, protection against coercion, confidentiality, and privacy.

Research subjects are routinely safeguarded from harm. What constitutes harm in service-learning projects? Rich observes that if a service-learning project is not well planned and carefully constructed, any resulting bad press could damage the university's reputation—let alone cause harm to any or all of the participants. Given that our research infrastructure is designed to protect against harm to participants, she suggests the need to identify similar protections related to service-learning activities.

Other topics Rich raises that have implications for the ethical aspects of service-learning are:

- Capacity, in terms of the capability of students with respect to maturity, skill, and knowledge to perform the tasks and duties expected by their instructor;
- Time available to complete the service activities and the resultant expectations of service;
- Oversight for monitoring and supervision of students at the service-learning site, taking into account training, credentials, and responsibility for supervision or monitoring;
- Exploitation, taking into consideration whether academics and their students are exploiting the community for learning purposes as we engage in service-learning endeavors; and
- Issues of power and mutuality/reciprocity of relationships.

Another important topic with ethical implications is the impact of dangerous knowledge. Rich raises significant questions about what to do if students become privy to confidences about suicide, violence, or criminal actions and queries the resulting

responsibilities to agency clients, the sponsoring agency, and the public. These are questions frequently not addressed until a difficult situation arises, and Rich's analysis suggests the need to be better prepared for these potential circumstances.

Rich suggests that universities should institutionalize some mechanism for ensuring that there is careful delineation of the potential benefits, as well as the risks, for all participants in the service-learning process. The ethical obligations of service-learning educators parallel the obligations of researchers to ensure informed and voluntary consent; conduct risk-benefit analysis, particularly when vulnerable populations are involved; consider confidentiality and privacy whenever possible; and ensure that all actors in the service-learning arena are treated with respect and dignity and not exploited.

Finally, Rich offers a series of recommendations that can be used to guide faculty and administrators as they consider the ethical dimensions of service-learning. These recommendations offer a useful basis for faculty and university administrators to develop ethical protocols for service-learning, and then to potentially negotiate such protocols with a community advisory group to guide future community-based learning and service projects.

Conclusions

Readers are encouraged to consider the various articles presented here and identify relevant opportunities both for enhancing service-learning practice and for identifying new directions and areas of emphasis for service-learning research. We are at a point in our learning where many of the basics of developing service-learning programs are well documented, including understanding of impact, lessons learned, and advice for others. Two directions need further attention. The first is the recognition of the importance of the conversations about "civic engagement" or "social sustainability" or whatever terminology fits best in a particular context, and further developing understanding of the various curricular and co-curricular strategies that will help higher education (students, faculty, community and institutional leaders) to better understand and pursue such philosophies. Service-learning is the academic vehicle that is best understood, but many other opportunities exist and our challenge is to better understand and apply them. The second direction is to continue to develop our research portfolio, expanding the range of topics addressed, experimenting with various methods, and widely disseminating our learning to share what we know and to further build support for this work. New directions in higher education depend upon a solid foundation of research to build knowledge, and it is vital that we act as scholars to make this knowledge widely known, understood, and accepted.

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