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Ensuring Mutually Beneficial Service Learning

Defining Service Learning

The Carnegie Foundation defines Community Engagement as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (“Carnegie”). An increasingly popular way for higher education to engage with community is through service learning, which often takes the form of offering students course credit for going into the community to take part in an activity or volunteer at a community based organization and then completing course work connected to that activity. Extensive research has been done to validate this method of learning from a student perspective. Benefits include students reporting via their reflections that they understand the world better by interacting with people very different from themselves. Educators report a higher quality work submissions, and a greater depth of learning compared to classes without a service learning component. Extensive studies have been conducted to back up these claims. There has been little research, however, into the question of whether service learning is indeed mutually beneficial to the community or to the people that the service learning experience is supposed to be helping. This paper seeks to explore this question of evaluating the impact of service learning on the community and to suggest best practices and a model for how the field could move forward in this regard to ensure a mutually beneficial experience.

Service Learning: Current Measurement Standards

Service learning projects are generally assigned by a course instructor. Projects will have a community service or volunteer component to them and a student must complete a pre-determined number of hours and then write about the experience by way of reflection. There are many variations on this, but this is the traditional model. The student is scored on whether or not they completed the community service and on the merits of their written report. In many cases, this is as far as evaluation goes in a college service learning classes. On this end of the evaluation continuum, there is little to no communication, beyond number of hours completed, between the instructor and the community based organization which supervised the student service learner. For some agencies and some higher education institutions—this is sufficient. The capacity building that comes from access to unpaid labor may result in more clients being served that otherwise would not be served, but it could also free up time for paid staff members to use in other ways (Blouin 125). This method of little to evaluation on the impact of service learning on the community is the most common method currently employed at higher education institutions.

Hilgendorf et al. claim

this inequity in research focus might seem logical from the academic perspective, since faculty are rewarded, administrators are promoted, and funding is provided to both public and private institutions based on the satisfaction of their "customer base" –the student. Evaluations and assessments of almost every facet of academic progress are done, from accreditation self-studies, to program reviews, to conferences focusing on best practices, and so forth. And while those evaluations are increasingly asking institutions to document their community

engagement, they are not yet asking them to document their community impact.

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The second most popular method of evaluating the impact on community of service learning programs include interviews and focus groups to gain insights from representatives from community based agencies on their reactions to the service learning partnership they have with the college. In 2003, San Francisco State University used a combination of surveys and focus groups to measure the effect their service learning program was having on the community partners they worked with. Of those who responded to the initial survey (52%), 92% reported that “the long-term, macro-level impact of community service learning in the community was that it: helped leverage grant funding; maintained nonprofit status by utilizing volunteers; and created the perception that attending college was possible for everyone” (Barrientos 1). Iowa State University conducted interviews to assess the impact of their service learning program on their community partner agencies (Erickson 260). Face-to-face interviews and open-ended questions are more appropriate than Likert scales and surveys to measure community impact because the research questions involved when trying to measure the impact on community from a service learning activity can be quite complex (Erickson 259).

The utilization of logic models is also a common theme in service learning literature. A broad need is identified and then followed up with action steps which could be taken to provide solutions for the identified need. The logic model is a sequential way of looking at a problem. Factors cause interventions which result in positive individual and community outcomes (Cress 100).

Tyron et al. suggest two models which hold promise for measuring community impact adequately. One is a project-based model developed by Beckman and Stoecker. By creating a

framework, the model forces project goals to be identified prior to starting the project, thereby giving a baseline that results can then be measured from (195). The second evaluation system advocated by Tyron et al., adopted by University of Wisconsin-Madison and over 200 other sites worldwide, is the Science Shop Model. Community based learning projects are first defined in terms of the desired community outcomes and impact and then programs and service learning opportunities from higher education stem from that initial research question (196). This approach sets goals from the beginning of project development, puts reporting mechanisms in place, develops metrics to obtain necessary evaluation components are included in the planning and implementation stages, and allows for the sharing of community partners between different initiatives in a complimentary fashion (196).

Education evaluation researcher Iván M. Jorrín-Abellán advocates the Evaluand-oriented Responsive Evaluation Model (EREM) to measure complex projects by being "oriented to the activity, the uniqueness and the plurality of the activity to be evaluated, promoting responsiveness to key issues and problems recognized by participants at the site, as well as stakeholders elsewhere" (146). Evaluation has three components in EREM: perspective, ground, and method. This type of evaluation begins with a highly descriptive narrative of the people, places, and tools that make the program being evaluated unique. The narrative then goes on to provide evidence in the form of program agendas and student-created work as well as observations and recognition of challenges and how the program overcomes those challenges.

Why measure the impact on community?

There are many reasons why service learning projects should look at the impact on community as part of their design and implementation. Three to take note of include the risks of

not evaluating, the increased communication which comes from evaluation, and the opportunities that exist for substantive community change.

A consequence of higher education not looking into the benefit to community organizations of their service learning initiatives is that the community could actually be wronged. Members of the community could feel exploited and refuse to work with higher education in the future (Hilgendorf 9). Blouin and Perry say that costs to community based organizations can be categorized two ways, risks and "draining of organizational resources" (127). Risks relate to privacy concerns associated with being in contact with the clients of many community based organizations and the lack of respect of some students or the lack of understanding about the sensitivity of certain situations. Oftentimes students will also share the results of their service learning activity and partner organization in the media without fact checking their information with the organization. This can perpetuate myths and spread untruths about the organization, albeit unintentionally. The reliability of student service learners varies dramatically, the repercussions being that sometimes a large amount of staff time is needed to manage the service learners or re-do or make up for work that was not done satisfactorily by the students (Blouin 127).

The second reason the impact on community should be measured is to improve communication among instructors and students on the one hand and community based agencies and their clients on the other. In many of the case studies which utilized surveys and interviews to measure the impact on community of service learning initiatives, the recurring complaint from community based agencies of all kinds involved communication breakdowns. In many cases community based organizations were taking on the training, tracking, and supervising of many students each semester at substantial cost to them, and expressed the desire to have more contact

with service learning facilitators and instructors in order to make the experience more beneficial for students as well as agencies. Embedding an evaluation component into the service learning experience could help address this prevalent concern. When the Office of Community Service Learning was established at San Francisco State University, creating mutually beneficial partnerships was recognized as being necessary to sustaining the service learning effort (Barrientos 2). The comments provided by community partners resulted in actionable items such as the updating of the website to improve communication, the development and use of formal service learning plans by faculty, implementation of an orientation program, the purchase of volunteer management software for college and partner use, and the recommendation to begin production of a newsletter (Barrientos 3).

A third reason for measuring the impact on community is to identify opportunities to create more substantive change by way of the service learning experiences a college initiates with its community partners. Expanding the lens from offering service learning because “it is good for the student” to “it’s good for the community AND student” offers the chance for more robust work to be undertaken by students each semester, increases the chances that the students will continue to be engaged in community work after the class ends, and provides the opportunity for community based agencies to better leverage the resources of the higher education institution to better articulate the work that is being done in their agencies. Although a service learning course may last only a semester, community based organizations report long-term benefits such as service learners staying on to fill volunteer, intern, or staff roles. Student learners will also help recruit other students to volunteer at the organization. Students also bring fresh ideas and perspectives that are useful long after the course ends (Blouin 126). Many community based organizations find value from the access to college resources such as faculty

expertise in the shared discipline of interest. This relationship building can lead to other collaborations (Blouin 126).

What are some promising practices to take note of?

Iowa State University: Project Plan Assessments Several Years Later

Analyzing interviews of community partners who had participated in an Iowa State University project based service learning design class which created project plans for various community development projects during the years 2001-2009, Erickson found three community impact themes emerge "foundational elements for success, impacts in the community, and external influences and impacts beyond the community" (260). These themes which emerged from the evaluation results provided a road map for designing future projects with clear objectives which meet community needs. Erickson realized there were impacts which are difficult to measure, yet still exist and should be recognized in a measurement system. An example of this is generation of economic benefits derived from the hiring of personnel to continue or build on service learning projects initiated by students. Another benefit from this particular assessment project is that it encourages other successful service learning projects to be presented and written about which could then lead to other institutions or community agencies replicating the project.

University of Denver: Creation of the Community Impact Scale (CIS)

The Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning at the University of Denver sponsored a research study which gathered and analyzed data with the express purpose of creating a Community Impact Scale (CIS) to evaluate the community-university partnerships from a community partner perspective. The research team conducted interviews with representatives from eight existing community partners of the university. Each interview

consisted of fifteen open-ended questions. The interviews were then analyzed, themes extracted, and scale items generated based on empirical and rational approaches. The resulting scale was presented to colleagues at a conference and edits were made; the scale then was tested by way of electronic survey method to 31 university community partner representatives. Due to the limitations of this study, authors recommend that this scale be used by other institutions as a foundational assessment tool and adapted as necessary. While the study assesses qualitative feedback from a community perspective, it fails to compare those results with expected outcomes, university expectations, or quantitative economic impact (Srinivas).

David A. Payne: The Use of Reports When Evaluating Service-Learning Activities & Programs

Despite its age, Payne's book *Evaluating Service-Learning Activities & Programs* offers some insights worth mentioning. In evaluating the use of formal evaluation reports in service learning programs, Payne stresses the importance of keeping motivations in the ethical frame of mind when creating these reports. Evaluation should be done to "illuminate the program to help see relationships, processes, and outcomes" (99). Payne's suggested report format includes an executive summary, background/overview, project goals, overview of treatment, evaluation objectives, description of targets, instrumentation, data collection/management, limitations, results, and recommendations (102). According to Payne, evaluators should include value judgements and recommendations about the project. Recommendations could include suggestions related to content, process, or application of results. Communication between the evaluator and stakeholders on whether or not to include these types of recommendations in the formal report needs to happen in order for the most good to come of the report (102). Once an evaluation is complete, there are still several factors which determine the success of the utilization of the report created, and a program's full potential may never be realized if the

following conditions are not met: mismatch in roles/styles of stakeholder and evaluator, lack of rigor in evaluation design, excess methodological rigor to the detriment of relevance of report, lack of utility in recommendations, lack of timeliness of report, external influences (money, politics) having more importance than the data, and failure to communicate results in a usable way (Payne 106).

What opportunities exist outside of the service learning discipline that could be applied to measuring the impact on community of service learning?

One of the hurdles of evaluating the community impact of service learning is that the questions are too complex and the activities taken on by service learners are usually just one piece of a complicated pie of treatment or services received by a particular community member in need. Hutchinson discusses this in her study “Measuring Engagement Impact on Communities.” Her course was designed around three research questions: "1. What impact does the project have on pre-service teacher understanding and knowledge of working with English language learners? 2. What impact does the project have on the adult literacy agency and its services? 3. What impact does the project have on English language learners and their progress?" (Hutchinson 34). The service learning class provided tutoring services to adult learners. This was just one of many services being utilized by the learners to reach their stated goals. Assessment measures such as pre and post tests were utilized by the partner organization; however, university researchers found it difficult to draw conclusive links between these and the effects of their student service learners. Hutchinson points out some opportunities to design service learning experiences with this obstacle in mind. The evaluation study could have been designed so as to set up experimental and control groups of students (those not being exposed to the service learner tutors) (42). Hutchinson also suggests that longitudinal studies be set up to

explore the long term effects of the service being provided by service learners. Also, consistency and tracking progress over time (more than semester by semester) could offer insight to service learning coordinators to design and implement projects with an evidence base at hand (42).

Hutchinson was able to draw these conclusions and understand the impact her students made not only because she maintained a high level of communication with the partner organization, but also because the organization conducted rigorous assessment to measure the progress of their clients and made that information available to Hutchinson. These same affordances are not available to most service learning coordinators or instructors.

Since there are few exemplary models to look at in terms of what is being done within the service learning discipline which tackles the issue of measuring community impact, it stands to reason that identifying how another field handles this issue may be worthwhile. There are many places to look for inspiration in this field—the field of healthcare has crossed the divide of student to professional practice with plenty of support literature to draw best practices which could potentially be applied to the field of service learning. Likewise, there is focus right now in the field of anthropology to study groups and identify how they live and grow over time. These principles would probably be intriguing to apply to the issue of community based learning and aid it receives in determining what help or detriment that aid ends up being. However, the aspect that is most intriguing is the concept of a partnership being mutually beneficial. Considering the factors of what makes a beneficial relationship to a community based organization, the issue of funding and capacity building returns again and again. It is helpful to consider how these organizations are evaluated themselves. If service learning is a piece of that, then knowing what the whole looks like and where the organization from a whole is coming from and the expectations placed on it from funders and community organizers can help service

learning organizers design projects that are truly mutually beneficial. Identifying lessons which can be learned from nonprofit evaluation, and more specifically to the more narrow focus of collective impact evaluation, can shed light on how tackling the complex problem of evaluating service learning from a community perspective might look. Collective impact is defined by Kania and Kramer as "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem" (36). In other words, it is the process of bringing very different groups together to tackle a shared goal or solve a problem. "Collective impact initiatives typically have five conditions that together produce true alignment and lead to powerful results: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations" (Kania 39).

This exploration will begin by exploring one case study to identify ways in which the project was designed from the beginning with an embedded evaluation model and how that informed program planning, implementation, and overall success. Shape Up Somerville is a collective impact project designed to address the childhood epidemic facing the city; the study began in 2003 and continues to this day. It started with Christina Economos, an associate professor in the school of nutrition at Tufts University, recognizing a local need that went beyond the school's reach and deciding to get involved, so she went to city government and community based organizations. A partnership was formed. To make the kind of impact on children's health that community leaders knew needed to happen, they first gathered statistics on the current state of obesity of the city's children and shared the information with community members by way of focus groups, interviews, and meetings. A team was formed to start the work of identifying ways this issue could be solved. Representatives from over 25 stakeholder groups contributed to the group (Juster 3). The group achieved tremendous success in their mission to

take “a community-based, participatory, environmental approach to prevent childhood obesity by transforming a community and informing social change at the national level by examining the effectiveness of the model on the prevention of undesirable weight gain in children” (Juster 4). The weight of the city's children did go down, and the city itself a healthier place to live with contributing successes such as increasing the opportunities to eat healthy food at local restaurants, higher quality and healthier school lunch options, trained educators and nurses to better guide overweight children in the schools, and increased acreage of parks in the city (Juster 4). Community leaders attribute this success to the following the collective impact strategy of sharing a common agenda, agreeing to shared measurement, supporting mutually reinforcing activities, maintaining continuous communication, and agreeing on a backbone organization to spearhead the effort (Juster 5).

It is unreasonable to assume that every educator in higher education who wishes to implement a service learning component in their class would wish to take on Economos’s example to not just improve the experience for his students but also to change the lives of an entire community of young people. However, there are lessons that can be learned from the collective impact model to improve service learning across the board.

Shared agenda

Understanding the problem that service learners will be going into the community to help solve is a valuable first step. Besides providing context for the student to understanding why they are being asked to do extra work in order to receive a good grade, it also serves as pre-training for students before they arrive at their community based agency and increases the chances that they will act appropriately and treat organization staff and community clients with respect. By the instructor or service learning coordinator developing a shared agenda with the partnering

organization, a better understanding can take place on the role of students and their contributions or lack of contributions to solving the bigger problem, or reason the community based organization exists. This exchange could be formalized with a memorandum of understanding, simple emails or even a recorded conversation. Just the act of establishing where service learning fits with regards to the bigger issue is a valuable first step.

Shared measurement

In some service learning projects it may be possible to set up experimental groups and control groups of clients receiving services and to conduct pre- and post-tests to ascertain the benefits received by community members from service learners. This opportunity is rare, but it does exist. There are also measurements that can be done which are quasi-experimental (where random assignment may not be possible, but it is still feasible to compare those who receive treatment to those who do not) in nature or those that utilize preliminary evidence (surveys, assessments) to measure progress. This continuum of evaluation is being utilized by one of the United States' largest funders of nonprofits—The Social Innovation Fund (SIF). All grantees are required to move their programs forward on the evaluation continuum which includes preliminary evidence, moderate evidence, and strong evidence (SIF 4). Significant resources are expected to be expended by grantees in order to deliver this evidence in the requested format, that of a comprehensive evaluation report with specifications as well as evaluation experts provided by SIF. The evaluation plan is approximately thirty-five pages long and includes an executive summary, introduction, program theory, logic model, outcomes of interest, research questions and contribution of the study, study components, protection of human subjects protocol, reporting results, timeline, budget, evaluator qualifications and independence, and grantee/subgrantee role and involvement (SIF 4). It takes significant resources to plan and

implement evaluation systems, and for most service learning projects the experimental or quasi-experimental route is near impossible. This does not mean that the issue of measurement should just be abandoned, however. It just means that finding measurements that provide meaning and will help service learning instructors, coordinators, and community based organizations assess the value of the service learning experience and inform the planning process of future collaborations.

There are opportunities for service learning coordinators to uncover unexpected outcomes when they choose to evaluate the effect of service learning on the community. This has held true with Collective Impact projects.

It is critical that the participants and evaluators of Collective Impact efforts understand and capture all of the ripple effects of their activities. This (a) provides a more holistic view of what is – or is not – being achieved, (b) offers deeper insight into the nature of the problem that they are trying to address and the context in which they are operating, (c) triggers groups to adjust or drop strategies that may not be delivering what they had hoped, and (d) surfaces new, often unexpected, opportunities as they emerge. Without a complete picture of their results, the chances that Collective Impact participants will be successful are dramatically reduced and the likelihood of unintentionally doing harm to a community or group is substantially greater. (Cabaj 116)

Mutually reinforcing activities

Service learning projects are usually semester based and revolve around a student school projects that they are trying to complete. It is prudent on the part of a higher education institution to have a coordinated approach to understanding the combined impact of many different classes of students going out into the community for a whole bunch of different reasons and

volunteering for short bits of time when the students are do so not for the goal of improving the community but for the goal of obtaining a grade. Many community based organizations receive students from many different classes and from many different educational institutions, and everyone has a different end game that may or may not align with the mission of the organization. Coordinating this effort and discussing this outpouring of short term help with community based organizations could lead to a more coordinated and helpful effort.

Strengthened partnerships could also be the result, since minor adjustments made could mean all the difference to those organizations being affected.

Maintaining continuous communication

Many instructors who launch service learning projects in their classroom have no contact with the community based organizations their students go to work in. Some have initial conversations but lack follow-up. Some maintain continuous communication which leads to a mutually beneficial partnership. Possible communication tools worth considering include partnership contracts, memorandums of understanding, meetings, email, and newsletters. Collective Impact also utilizes communication tools such as logic models, data dictionaries, and shared application forms (Farley 14). Collective Impact requires the communication plan to be implemented from the beginning in order to achieve the highest result.

Backbone Organization

Generally with Collective Impact, the backbone organization “supports fidelity by the various cross-sector players to both the common agenda and rules for interaction” (Kania 3). Higher education institutions serve this role in other areas, but not yet in the field of service learning. This does not mean that they cannot. Oftentimes colleges will work with partnering agencies to plan and implement grant projects together. This approach could serve the field of

service learning well if implemented in higher education institutions with dedicated service learning centers.

What are the proposed strategies for measuring the impact on community of service learning?

It is important to remember why evaluation is important in service learning.

1. Accountability—Key stakeholders require it.
2. Proving program impact—To make the case that what you do makes a difference.
3. Program improvement—To see what's working and use data for program management and improvement.
4. Marketing/fundraising—To generate support for your program.
5. Knowledge development—To generate information that will improve the quality of practice in the field. (Berger 102)

The field of service learning has an opportunity to make substantive change in the communities in which it is practiced. It is time for research in this field to expand to tackle the question of if service learning is mutually beneficial to the community in which the service learners serve. If it is, then service learning organizers should be embedding developmental evaluation into the service learning experience.

Developmental evaluation supports program and organizational development to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities from a complex systems perspective.

Developmental evaluation differs from typical program improvement evaluation (making a program better) in that it involves changing the program model itself as part of innovation and response to changed conditions and understandings. (Patton 278)

Even when it is known that the measurement opportunities may not be the best case, experimental based method, incorporating evaluation of the community impact is still necessary.

Service learning organizers should

embrace an adaptive approach to wrestling with complexity... This means replacing the paradigm of pre-determined solutions and “plan the work and work the plan” stewardship with a new style of leadership that encourages bold thinking, tough conversations and experimentation, planning that is iterative and dynamic, and management organized around a process of learning-by-doing. (Cabaj 111)

What makes the tools of Collective Impact evaluation a perfect model for service learning is that the goals align perfectly. Service learning already asks students reflective questions and requires them to evaluate a difficult problem. By adopting a Collective Impact lens on this situation, those same questions are simply asked of the community based organizations with whom higher education institutions are already working with.

It begins with asking better questions: rather than ask “Did we achieve what we set out to achieve?”, Collective Impact participants and their evaluators should ask, “What have been ALL the effects of our activities? Which of these did we seek and which are unanticipated? What is working (and not), for whom and why? What does this mean for our strategy?” Simply framing outcomes in a broader way will encourage people to cast a wider net in capturing the effects of their efforts. (Cabaj117)

Strategies that service learning centers within higher education institutions could employ to begin the work of aligning their evaluation techniques to those of collective impact include:

- Implement a communication plan which provides opportunities for partners to collaborate, share, and make corrections to existing programs as necessary.

- Develop goals for the service learning experience. Include community impact outcomes as well as student learning outcomes.
- Measure and share the results of the expected and unexpected outcomes of the service learning experience. Use the results to inform decisions about future projects.
- Create a centralized database of people and partners involved in service learning from a higher education institution. Ensure all stakeholders understand what is happening as a whole and that someone is coordinating efforts in order to build on best practices, avoid less successful approaches, and coordinate larger projects that involve multiple partners around a central issue.

Challenges of applying the Collective Impact model to service learning

Adding complexity

Adding complexity to any effort generally means fewer people will choose to play. This is a risk of trying to add a framework to the practice of service learning in higher education. If the primary audience is the student, then spending effort in measuring and tracking results on the community side could make the service learning project too time intensive and not worth adopting. There are opportunities to turn this obstacle into a rallying cry, however. Most higher education institutions are concerned with bringing money into their institutions through grants. The opportunity to win grants and attract donors is amplified when the work of providing high quality educational experiences through service learning is proved to also be mutually beneficial to community members. It is difficult to prove this if the questions are not being asked to begin with and the results of those efforts are not being measured.

Adding cost

Evaluation of any kind requires expending resources of time and money, which is sometimes just not available to be expended. This is why the evaluation plan needs to be developed prior to starting a service learning project. Evaluation results should benefit the community based organization as well as the higher education institution. When this case is made, then there is greater incentive for the organization to find the time and effort to help conduct the evaluations. A criticism of collective impact is that it requires time to input measurement results into a shared system, which is often a different system than others that the organizations utilize for their funders or national affiliates. Technology may offer solutions for this obstacle in the future. There are currently some data tracking mechanisms available which are programmed specifically to measure collective impact from multiple stakeholders. One such provider, which is utilized by The Building Bright Futures initiative in Omaha and Boston's city-wide youth collaborative is nFocus Solutions. While this particular commercial solution may not be feasible for many service learning centers, lessons can be learned from their support materials for developing an in-house or open source solution or putting out a bid for a software option to manage the project (Farley 16).

Conclusion

Collective Impact is showing remarkable progress in its ability to make substantial progress on complex social issues such as childhood obesity, education, crime, poverty, and more. Higher education is partnering with many agencies which tackle these hot button issues in many ways in order to offer high quality service learning experiences to its students. The opportunity exists for colleges to implement the framework from the Collective Impact

movement in its approach to service learning to obtain a holistic look at their own service learning programs and open opportunities to reach communities in greater ways.

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