

Twenty-first Century Learning: How Institutionalized is Service Learning?

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Service learning is an instructional method that combines community service with classroom instruction, focusing on critical, reflective thinking as well as personal and civic responsibility. Service learning programs involve students in activities that address local needs while developing their academic skills and commitment to their community. – Robinson, 1999

Over the last twenty years (and some may argue, even longer than that), educators have increasingly been turning to service learning in order to contextualize theory-based classes, strengthen ties between the curriculum and the community, and make academic content more relevant to adult learners (Community Involvement in Service Learning, accessed July 30, 2004). Many institutions of higher education now realize that, as the Wingspread Group on Higher Education stated, “We know that teaching is more than lecturing. We know that active engagement in learning is more productive than passive listening. We know that experiential learning can be even more so” (p. 14).

The increased adoption of service learning by higher education instructors has stimulated an increased interest in the study of this pedagogical tool. Research has focused primarily on the development and implementation of service learning programs in educational institutions. Studies have focused on investigating the viability of these programs to address issues such as retention, academic success, the development of critical thinking and other life and job skills, and the development of civic-minded, compassionate adults who are prepared to work to make society a better place (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000; and Schachter, 1999). While these studies support the belief that participating in service learning creates positive changes for students, and point the way to factors that promote effective service learning programs, research has been almost completely lacking in identifying the factors that are necessary to sustain such programs once they have been developed. For service learning

to become a meaningful and permanent part of education, considerations should move beyond development and begin focusing on sustainability.

While studies on service learning institutionalization are few, one study, by Bringle and Hatcher (2000), investigated the level of institutionalization of service learning programs by looking at four areas in higher education institutions. To do this, the researchers analyzed questionnaire responses of 179 attendees at a national colloquium on service to determine the level of institutionalization as measured by the achievement of activities in four constituency areas: organization, faculty, student, and community.

Within the organizational level, these researchers found that institutionalization of service learning was higher when the work of stakeholders had translated into the inclusion of service learning into the college's mission statement and was reflected in university publicity, budget allocations to the program, and broad administrative and staff support. At the faculty level, the institutionalization of service learning was indicated by stakeholders' work on course and curriculum development, faculty development activities, recognition and rewards based on service learning participation, broad faculty support for the program, and scholarship on service learning. At the student level, institutionalization indicators were found in service learning scholarships, service learning classes, and co-curricular transcripts that documented service. Finally, at the community level, institutionalization was identified when agency resources were "coupled with those of the academy to build reciprocal, enduring, and diverse partnerships that mutually supported community interests and academic goals" (p. 275).

The results revealed that institutionalization of service learning was greatest in colleges that conducted regular strategic planning, established a centralized service learning office, increased institutional budget commitments to support service learning development, and had the centralized office report to the college's chief academic officer.

Bringle and Hatcher's (2000) study is valuable in its comprehensiveness, yet only 15% of the respondents represented community colleges. In reviewing the research that has been done on the institutionalization of service learning programs in higher education, it seems clear that many aspects of the process of institutionalization have been discovered through studying the process that has occurred in four-year institutions (Calleson, Serow, & Parker, 1998). What remains unclear is whether institutionalization

of service learning programs in community colleges occurs in the same way or includes the same factors as the institutionalization of such programs in four-year schools. Traditionally, community colleges do not have a history of formal volunteerism to build upon, and traditionally, the service component of faculty tenure has been less of an imperative. It is possible then that the momentum to institutionalize such a program as service learning in a community college may play out differently than that which occurs in other institutions of higher learning. This research study was therefore conducted to ascertain whether the institutionalization factors identified by Bringle and Hatcher (2000) are also important in institutionalizing service learning programs in community colleges.

Methodology

Instrumentation

The Service Learning Institutionalization Survey was developed by Gail Robinson, Coordinator of Service Learning at the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (used with permission). The survey contained 40 questions that were organized around four topics: infrastructure issues (25 questions), faculty issues (six questions), student issues (four questions), and community partnership issues (five questions).

Sample

In 1995, when AACC surveyed community colleges, one of the questions asked was whether the surveyed college had a service learning program on campus. Of those 350 that identified themselves as service learning colleges, 47% self-identified as rural, 33% identified as urban, and 20% identified as suburban (Robinson & Barnett, 1996). Based on this AACC survey, the sampled 100 community colleges from the population were chosen for the current survey based on these findings; thus 47 rural colleges, 33 urban colleges, and 20 suburban colleges were randomly selected from each of the three geographic groupings that comprised the population. The goal was to create a proportionate stratified random sample that accurately reflected the population's characteristics. Thirty-six states were represented in this selection.

Surveys were mailed to the service learning contact person given by the college in the 1995 AACC survey. Attached was a personalized letter from the researcher promising that a summary of survey results would be sent to each respondent along with a letter of introduction written by Gail Robinson at AACC. After three weeks, a reminder phone call and email (when possible) was made to those who had not yet responded. Two weeks after this, another phone call was made to those not responding.

Out of the 100 surveys sent, responses were received from 70 of the colleges. The highest rate of responses came from suburban community colleges (85%), followed by rural community colleges (70%) and then urban community colleges (54%). Finally, 11% of the surveyed colleges revealed that the service learning program was no longer in existence at the time that they survey was received. The majority of these colleges were rural.

Results

As in the Bringle and Hatcher (2000) study, a measure of institutionalization for each of the four issue areas (infrastructure, faculty, student, community partner) was created by computing means for responses to questions in each of these areas on the survey. Difference among means for the infrastructure issues (II), faculty issues (FI), student issues (SI), and community partner issues (CPI) were analyzed for all colleges, and then separately for rural colleges, suburban colleges, and then urban colleges. Questions that represented each issue demonstrated good internal consistency within each issue group for each college grouping (Cronbach's alpha ranged from a low of 0.69 for the FI in the urban colleges to a high of 0.91 for the II in the rural colleges) with the exception of the II in the urban colleges (Cronbach's alpha of .36). It is unclear why questions about infrastructure institutionalization were not found to be internally consistent for urban colleges, but due to this occurrence, any findings about infrastructure issues in urban colleges should be viewed with caution.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on each of the four college groupings to investigate whether there were any significant differences among the means for each institutionalization issue. A significance level of 0.05 and higher was used for all analyses. When a significant difference was detected among the four issues, a

post hoc Tukey HSD test was conducted to determine which issues were significantly different from each other.

When an ANOVA was conducted on the data for all colleges, a significant difference was detected among means of the four issues ($F = 4.793$, $p < 0.007$). The Tukey HSD post hoc test revealed that faculty issues scores were significantly higher than infrastructure issues scores among all the colleges in the study (-0.600 , $p < 0.015$).

The ANOVA conducted on the data for rural colleges also detected a significant difference among the means of the four issues ($F = 7.585$, $p < 0.001$). The Tukey HSD post hoc test again revealed that faculty issues were significantly higher than infrastructure issues scores among the rural colleges in the study (-0.846 , $p < 0.0001$).

The ANOVA conducted on the data for suburban colleges again detected a significant difference among means of the four issues ($F = 7.969$, $p < 0.000$). The Tukey HSD post hoc test revealed that in suburban colleges, faculty issues were significantly higher than infrastructure issues (-0.967 , $p < 0.000$), and faculty issues were significantly higher than student issues (0.707 , $p < 0.043$).

The final ANOVA, conducted on the data for urban colleges, detected a significant difference among means of the four issues ($F = 3.841$, $p < 0.018$). The Tukey HSD post hoc test revealed that in urban colleges, faculty issues were again significantly higher than infrastructure issues (0.045 , $p < 0.045$).

Discussion and Conclusion

From the analyses that were conducted, in each college grouping there was a significant difference between faculty issues and infrastructure issues, with faculty issues having the higher score. In the suburban colleges, an additional significant difference was discovered between faculty issues and student issues, with faculty issues again scoring higher. Once more, results about infrastructure issues in urban colleges should be viewed with caution as the questions representing infrastructure issues did not appear to be internally consistent when measured in the urban colleges

At first glance, the findings of this study did not reflect the findings in the Bringle and Hatcher (2000) study. While Bringle and Hatcher found that institutionalization was affected the most by institutional factors such as developing campus infrastructure to

support service learning, the use of institutional instead of grant funds to support the program, and a reporting structure that involved the chief academic officer, this study found that in the community colleges included in this study, faculty issues were more predictive of the degree of service learning institutionalization. Faculty issues that were reported as occurring on community college campuses included regular service learning faculty orientations, service learning faculty development activities, mentoring of newer service learning faculty, and the recognition of service learning in the college's roles and rewards structure. While explanations of the difference between studies can only be speculative at this point, perhaps the role of community colleges as being solely one of teaching makes faculty stakeholders and faculty issues around service learning more crucial to institutionalizing a service learning program at a community college.

When the results of both studies are considered more carefully, it would appear that results from the Bringle and Hatcher (2000) study should not be ignored in this study's conclusions about service learning institutionalization in community colleges. As Bringle and Hatcher found, it is hard to imagine a service learning program becoming fully institutionalized without the support of stakeholders at the organizational level. Thus while this study points to prioritizing the acquisition of faculty support for service learning when working in a community college, simultaneously working on gaining institutional support in the form of budget allocations, publicity, administrative and staff support, and by including service learning in the campus's mission statement will ultimately increase the degree of program institutionalization.

Conclusion

In looking at the research that has been done on service learning, it seems clear that what knowledge has been gathered about service learning over the last twenty years describes a program in its adolescence. For service learning to become a meaningful and permanent part of education, considerations should move beyond development and begin focusing on sustainability. It is this second step that is needed so that the work of development and implementation do not get swept away because steps were not taken to institutionalize the developed and implemented program within the college. The level of attainment of such sustainability seems to be vitally important to anyone who desires that

his or her innovation become integrated into an organization on a long-term basis, but the problem traditionally has been a lack of knowledge about the specific factors that would indicate such integration. Certainly, for directors of service learning programs, information about the necessary steps necessary to ensure the long-term survival of this innovative instructional technique seems to be needed. While more studies are needed in this area, this study is offered as a piece of a road map for those seeking a path toward moving service learning programs toward sustainability.

Works Cited:

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