Evaluating Service-Learning Programs

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What we know about service-learning programs regarding impacts on students, communities, institutions:

- little systematic data analysis has been done;

- most existing findings are anecdotal;

- findings that exist are narrow in scope and are typically non-generalizeable to other programs;

- most studies on service-learning have focused on the impact of service on student (service provider) development;

- there are a growing number of service-learning evaluations that are assessing the impacts of service on communities (service recipients);

- assessments of the impacts of service-learning on institutions are negligible

- regarding impacts on students, we know that service can impact students in six domains: academic achievement, career development, social development, personal development, civic responsibility, and ethical development (See Kendall et al, Eds.; 1990; Williams, 1990; Conrad & Hedin, 1987).

MAXIM I. Evaluating service-learning programs is especially challenging and difficult.

- programs are idiosyncratic and consequently require evaluations tailored specifically for the program;

- the unit of analysis is often difficult to determine: the program, the class, the student, the "community", the institution, the instructor, those served by the community agency at which the student serves, etc.

- few well-tested instruments exist that measure specifically the impacts of service-learning;

- existing attitudinal, psychometric, and educational achievement instruments are often inadequate or inappropriate for service-learning programs;

- little time and money for evaluation;

- a great deal of what happens in service-learning programs is often serendipitous; consequently, at the start of a program, it is often difficult to determine what to assess;

- service-learning programs are inherently complex; the individual and independent nature of service-learning makes for the controlling of independent variables difficult.

- program impacts on participants are likely to manifest themselves over longer periods of time.

Maxim II: Service-Learning "program evaluation" (did we achieve our program goals?) often implies or requires a formal "research" study (cause/effect).

> The degree to which formal research is required is dependent upon the established programs goals that need to be evaluated.

Service-Learning Program Goals

Example #1:

Washington High School students in a biology course serve at senior citizen centers to increase their understanding of the aging process, especially in regards to how men and women age differently.

Example #2:

30 Clinton High School students will serve as junior high school math tutors and raise junior school students' math scores on the CTBS by 20%.

Example #3:

The goal of the project is to increase teachers' involvement in service-learning by 20%.

MAXIM III: **There is no one best way to do service-learning evaluation or research.**

Most commonly used data collection methods and data sources:

- Post only questionnaires and satisfaction surveys
- Pre-, Post-surveys
- Interviews (focus group, individual, larger group)
- Journals (Student & Faculty)
- Site visits and observations
- Examples of student work
- Field placement feedback forms
- Student records

> Most service-learning evaluation experts agree that one should not rely on only one data collection method to evaluate his or her program. Use multiple data collection methods and data sources to ensure that the findings are supported in a variety of ways.

MAXIM IV: Service-Learning evaluation is fraught with dilemmas and ultimate trade-offs.

> Every decision we make affects the shape and look of our evaluation. Every decision we make should be rationalized and justified.

1) What do/should we measure among the plethora of possible outcome measures?

2) What is/should be the unit of analysis?

3) Which instruments do we use?

4) For whom should the evaluation be intended? (audience)

5) Will this assessment be a program evaluation, a research study, or both?

6) How much data collection can be managed; what parts of the program do we forgo evaluating this year?

7) Who will conduct the evaluation?

8) Which independent variables do we include/exclude?

9) Which data will be reported this year and which will be used for future reporting?

10) How will the findings be reported?

THINGS TO REMEMBER:

1) Evaluating service-learning programs is especially challenging and difficult.

•programs are idiosyncratic and consequently require evaluations tailored specifically for the program;

•the unit of analysis is often difficult to determine: the program, the class, the student, the "community", the institution, the instructor.

•few well-tested instruments exist that measure specifically the impacts of community service activities;

•a great deal of what happens in serviceprograms is often serendipitous; consequently, at the start of a program, it is often difficult to determine what outcomes to assess;

•program impacts on participants are likely to manifest themselves over longer periods of time.

2) There is no one best way to do service-learning evaluation or research.

<u>Most commonly used data collection methods</u>

• *Post only questionnaires and surveys*

• *Field placement feedback forms*

• *Journals (Student & Faculty)*

• *Site visits and observations*

• *Examples of student work*

• *Pre-, Post-surveys*

• *Student records*

• *Interviews*

Most service-learning evaluation experts agree that one should not rely on only one data collection method to evaluate his or her program. Use multiple data collection methods and data sources to ensure that the findings are supported in a variety of ways.

3) Service program "evaluation" (*did we achieve our program goals?*) **is not always the same as a formal "research" study** (*this program caused the impact*).

The degree to which formal research is required is dependent upon the established programs goals that need to be evaluated.

Cause and effect statements about a program's impact should be avoided unless a formal research design is employed.

4) Service program evaluation is fraught with dilemmas and ultimate trade-offs.

Every decision we make affects the shape and look of our evaluation. Decisions about what instruments to use, which outcomes to measure, which aspects of the program to evaluate, need to be be rationalized and justified.

EVALUATION TIPS

Successful service program evaluations:

•measure constructs consistent with program goals

•include both qualitative and quantitative data

•utilize instruments that are reliable and have good test-retest value

•are not narrowly focused and allow for serendipity

•collect and report on data that is useful to the intended audience

•have clearly defined limits, scopes, and purposes.

SERVICE-LEARNING EVALUATION TIPS

Successful service-learning evaluations:

- measure constructs consistent with program goals

- include both qualitative and quantitative data

- utilize instruments that are reliable and have good test-retest value

- measure constructs that are clearly definable

- are not narrowly focused and allow for serendipity

- collect and report on data that is useful to the intended audience

- are able to withstand methodological scrutiny (how did you arrive at those figures, what analyses were employed)

- have clearly defined limits, scopes, and purposes.

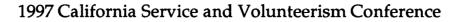- are longitudinal, multi-year, and phased

10 Tips for Effective Surveying

#1   Ask for information you can use

#2   Be clear and use standard English

#3   Keep it short and simple

#4   Ask questions that respondents can answer credibly and without much re-investigation

#5   Be specific and concrete as possible

#6   Avoid Biased Words and Phrases

#7   Approach personal questions with sensitivity

#8   Avoid "double-barreled" questions

#9   Provide options that are clear, connected, mutually exclusive and complete.

#10   Avoid limiting choices for respondents

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adapted from Maryann Jacobi Gray, 1995
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Dilemmas in Service-Learning Evaluation

RECONCILIATION WORKSHEET

DILEMMA	CHOICES	TRADE-OFFS	DECISION	RATIONALE
1) What do/should we measure among the plethora of possible outcome measures?	1) Breadth vs. Depth			
2) What is/should be the unit of analysis?	1) Part vs. Whole 2) Individual vs. Aggregation			
3) Which instruments do we use?	1) Existing vs. Newly developed 2) Service-Learning specific or Construct general 3) Quantitative vs. Qualitative			

DILEMMA	CHOICES	TRADE-OFFS	DECISION	RATIONALE
4) For whom should the evaluation be intended? (audience)	1) Internal vs. External 2) Formative vs. Summative			
5) What is the intent of this assessment?	1) Research vs. Program Evaluation			
6) What parts of the program do we forgo evaluating this year? (data manageability)	1) Breadth vs. Depth 2) Part vs. Whole			

DILEMMA	CHOICES	TRADE-OFFS	DECISION	RATIONALE
7) Who will conduct the evaluation?	1) Internal evaluator vs. External evaluator			
8) Which independent variables do we include/exclude?	1) Breadth vs. Depth 2) Program induced vs. Externally present			
9) Which data will be reported this year and which be used for future reporting?	1) Short-term eval. vs. long-term eval. 2) Formative eval. vs. Summative eval.			
10) How will the findings be reported?	1) In technical language vs. in Lay persons terms			