

Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College SACS Reaffirmation—QEP Topic Service Learning Review of Best Practices

In his *A Learning College for the 21st Century*, community college guru Terry O'Banion puts forth the notion that two-year institutions today should “turn the university ideal of a ‘community of scholars’ into a new ideal of ‘communities of learners’” (54). In other words, the focus of instruction should not be on a lecture-based, instructor-led scenario but on the creation of communities among all participants of the learning process. Proponents of service-learning would certainly echo O'Banion's sentiment, although from a slightly different angle. Whereas his emphasis is mainly on the development of learning cohorts within the campus community, service-learning fosters relationships between the students and the community at large. However, the inherent point is still the same; students learn course objectives best by interacting with others—by having a concrete experiences and opportunities for reflection rather than just sitting in a desk writing them down from lecture notes (See Lewin's Cycle diagram.). In service-learning, the community emphasis is there; is it just a more expansive one.

For purposes of assessing the effectiveness of these programs, though, the issue is a bit more difficult to handle than a traditional testing format. As O'Banion maintains, with learner-centered innovations such as service-learning, the emphasis is on outcome measures (46). Just as a service-learning initiative

calls for a new approach to teaching and learning, so, too, does it call forth a different stance toward assessment. In point of fact, O'Banion goes so far as to suggest the application of business concepts such as TQM, with its emphasis on viewing activities as processes toward a goal of continuous improvement, to learner-centered organizations (Dobyns and Crawford-Mason 36). Clearly, a service-learning plan requires much forward thinking.

According to recent surveys by the American Association of Community Colleges, half of all community colleges offer service-learning in their curricular programs. Obviously, some do a better job with it than others. It is critical that institutions have an evaluation process to assess whether the program is successful. In good programs, participants decide on a set of objectives for the service-learning experience and determine measurable indicators for these goals. Exemplary service-learning efforts, thus, are based on goals, mission, components, guiding principles, requirements, all of which undergo regular evaluation and improvement.

To address the institutionalization of a service-learning program in the curricular area, the Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College QEP Team studied literature pertinent to both successful service-learning programs in general and the reflective writing theme that is so vital to the instructional component of these activities. To enhance the effectiveness of this review, the Team divided into two subcommittees—one devoted to service-learning practices and the other to reflective writing. After a time period devoted to research, the members reassembled a number of times as a full group to share findings and address

concerns for future research. With further discussion, the QEP Team concluded that a truly beneficial study of best-practices would focus on the following categories:

1. **Committing to the Service-Learning Project:** This component would focus on an assessment of community needs and issues, a review of student capacities and interests, a look at students' academic goals, an examination of connecting student academic goals to service, and an assessment of putting community and student needs into a service-learning commitment.
2. **Setting Goals in a Student Outcomes Plan:** This component would focus on assembling the participants, focusing on outcomes, accomplishing outcomes, developing support networks, and measuring indicators of constituent outcomes.
3. **Linking Service and Learning with Reflective Learning Experiences:** This component would focus on using student outcome plans to state goals and objectives, reflective learning experiences, and sharing of instructional responsibilities.
4. **Evaluating Projects:** This component would focus on developing service-learning evaluation plans, implementing these evaluation plans, and analyzing/interpreting this evaluative data.

The American Association for Higher Education has assembled a listing of a number of colleges and universities (<http://www.aahe.org/service/models.htm>) that they consider to be models of best practice in the service-learning area. On their web site, the AAHE provides in-depth profiles of these schools, focusing on institutionalized service-learning programs and what can be gleaned from them by those interested in this teaching methodology. While these schools, responding to the needs of its community and students, are all different, each has something substantial to share in regard to at least one of the four categories mentioned above, a factor the QEP Team kept in mind as it conducted its review of best practices in service-learning.

Committing to the Service-Learning Project

All good fledgling Boy Scouts learn the mantra “Be prepared.” It is a saying that guides them on their way. It is also one that those engaged in service-learning remember, and certainly one that those with high expectations hold close to heart, for nothing comes from nothing. A college must commit to a service-learning project in order for it to be successful. “Commitment” in the early stages, is just another way to “Be prepared,” to plan thoroughly. In this initial phase, student learning needs are connected to real community needs based on "a shared vision and clearly articulated values" (Pritchard and Whitehead 58). This vision is based on an assessment of community needs and issues, a review of student capacities and interests, a look at students’ academic goals, an examination of connecting student academic goals to service, and an assessment of putting community and student needs into a service-learning commitment. Committing to service-learning enlists instructors, students, and community partners in laying foundations for shared project development. Together, they focus on service needs and issues, students' academic goals and kinds of service that can integrate these elements. This planning leads them to a proposal for a collaborative service-learning project and the formation of a service-learning project team. Instructors guide this integrative approach with their students in ways consistent with their own teaching experience, students' needs, interests and abilities, and the level of available service-learning support.

Mary Kay Schneider, intern with the AAHE’s Service Learning Project, maintains that central to the initial planning stage is a vision and a well-defined mission for a service-learning initiative. As Schneider states, “Mission

statements, guiding principles, and vision statements guide most model service-learning programs” (<http://www.aahe.org/service/bulletin%20article.htm>). By clearly articulating a purpose and a long-range vision, model programs make it easy for academic leadership, faculty, and others to understand service-learning and how it furthers the institutional mission and student learning. In addition, the vision guides faculty and staff in planning and developing the service-learning program. Tying the service-learning mission to the institutional mission is a thread shared by all successful institutions. Benefits include centrality of service-learning, easier justification of funding, greater buy-in by faculty and administrators, and assessment of outcomes that support the institution. By way of illustration, she uses a pertinent segment of a mission statement from an unnamed school. This mission charges the institution with "strong support within the administration for service-learning and a rationale for budget requests and grant applications." To this end, bringing together student and community needs is based around a core institutional philosophy from which all else radiates. Without this support from the college mission, community, faculty, and student buy-in are piecemeal and half-hearted, and such an approach is unlikely to have even marginal success, much less prosper.

In “Building the Service-Learning Pyramid: Engaging Campuses, Creating Citizens,” an initiative funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, Campus Compact (a non-profit organization devoted to assisting higher education in providing young people with the values, skills, and knowledge of active citizenship) maintains that “Service-learning exposes students to the needs of the larger society, engages

them in addressing those needs through community service, and connects what they learn in the classroom to real-world conditions.” However, profitable learning connections, based on an assessment of community and student needs, must be brought together under the umbrella of an institutional vision built on a steering mission with supporting (and supportable) goals.

Setting Goals in a Student Outcomes Plan

Abraham Lincoln once quipped that if he knew he had to spend six hours chopping wood he would take four hours of this time to sharpen his ax. In other words, he would spend the bulk of his work time getting ready for the task ahead so that it would be both easier and more efficient. It would not be a bad idea for a service-learning practitioner to have this saying taped to his or her wall. Any instructor knows that a day’s lesson has windows for opportunity and failure. Thinking ahead will help to broaden the former and limit the latter, though. Because there are many more elements involved with a service-learning activity, possibilities for problems increase. To this end, there are many more windows for failure here than in a standard lesson, unit, or project, so extra care must be taken.

Another aspect of best practices in the service-learning arena, then, deals with assembling the participants, focusing on outcomes, accomplishing outcomes, developing support networks, and measuring indicators of constituent outcomes. Effective service-learning projects depend upon reciprocity, “the act of giving and receiving at the same time such that all parties in the service relationship teach each other and learn from each other” (qtd. in Pritchard and

Whitehead 72). Thus, a service-learning project becomes what educational theorist John Bremer referred to as a “school without walls” (Postman and Weingartner 205), for students learn outside the confines of a conventional classroom. However, the pieces must all be properly put into place beforehand if the methodology is to be effective.

While the old saying “One person can make a difference” is certainly true, service-learning, by its very nature, has to involve a number of constituents. The American Association of Higher Education bulletin on service-learning maintains that a successful endeavor involves all parties from the very start. Community service agencies and community members play critical roles in the design, administration, and evaluation of service-learning. As this document states, “For most institutions, the community was viewed as a partner in a joint venture.” Community members may sit on steering committees, work with faculty in designing course curricula, evaluate student volunteers, develop collaborative partnerships, and even co-teach a course. Administration of programs is a shared responsibility depending on the projects, the site, and the funding sources. It is critical to build long-term relationships with all partners in order to effect positive community change. The importance of embedding the work from its inception with all members is a critical best practices lesson to learn, for all parties must benefit.

To ensure this reciprocity, key institutional and community players must be assembled from the start, outcomes for students in academic, service, and personal growth areas must be established, a formal plan that shows how

students will indicate outcomes achievement must be created, indicators for measurement must be developed, and responsibility must be doled out. This aspect of best practice shows a team's commitment to student outcomes, collaboration, and full engagement.

Linking Service and Learning with Reflective Learning Experiences

There is a mantra in all the literature about service-learning: "Service without learning is just that...." While any effort on the part of a college to encourage good old-fashioned voluntary service is certainly laudable, and all who engage in it are to be praised, to be "service-learning," an undertaking must consider the words on either side of the hyphen--"service" and "learning." Thus, one best practice that all good service-learning programs must share is the learning component. Without it, the activity is just an act of volunteerism. Institutions that use the service-learning methodology employ student outcome plans to state goals and objectives, reflective learning experiences, and sharing of instructional responsibilities.

For service-learning to fulfill its intent, there must be a way to link academic study to the service experience and to encourage personal growth. Reflection, to think on, to consider, to ponder, and so on, the learning experience, usually with a language-based (written or oral) product that shows the evidence of doing so, provides this avenue. Be they liberal arts and sciences, engineering, nursing, every area of the curriculum can offer a service-learning component. It is a methodology that may be integrated into any curriculum by faculty who choose to participate in it.

To return to the comments of AAHE's Mary Kay Schneider, the effectiveness of a service-learning plan may be measured by a variety of means (surveys, etc), but the central measure of value has to be based on learning outcomes for students. Schneider cites the case of the University of Michigan. Their service-learning mission is to engage students and faculty in a process that combines community service and academic learning to promote civic participation, build community capacity, and enhance the educational process. While many institutions tend to have defined outcomes, these often go unmeasured. The University of Michigan, however, has various ways of assessing these outcomes, but student reflection is always at the core.

In any learning experience, students create some type of product or performance that demonstrates their knowledge and skills. The trick in service-learning seems to lie in formalizing the assessment process to tie the service clearly to the desired learning results (i.e. the course objectives) (Cable in the Classroom Website). A third aspect of best practice for a service-learning program, thus, will employ what may be referred to as "authentic assessment." Although one can find many attempts to define this term, one that is especially applicable to service-learning is that generated by Jon Mueller. It is "A form of assessment in which students are asked to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills" (Authentic Assessment Toolbox Website). To perform "meaningful application" requires the reflection component of service-learning, for it focuses the students on a real problem for a real audience with the aim being a learning link to the curriculum.

As Anuradha Gokhale states in her article “Collaborative Learning Enhances Critical Thinking,” there is no better method to do this than reflective writing. The service itself is a method, but it is the writing that shows evidence of learning.

A best practice for a service-learning activity has an end product—sometimes called a “summative assessment task”—based in writing. Of course, there are many different kinds of possibilities, ranging from the informality of a journal to something that requires more structure and development such as a report or essay. No matter what the assignment, though, reflection has to be built in. While this is not such a major deal for a composition teacher, for others, it is a move to foreign ground. Therefore, comfort level must be considered. Most schools in the AAHE best practices category utilize rubrics.

A rubric is a guide, usually presented as a chart, which identifies and describes various levels of performance on a writing assignment. The evaluated components aid in determining average, above average, or below average performance in a specific or general manner (Teaching Today Weekly Tips). Rubrics are helpful to teachers (as well as students), for they offer an equitable manner in which to apply objective standards to seemingly subjective assignments. In other words, instructors who are uncomfortable with grading writing can use them to overcome anxiety and develop an accountable assessment method for a reflective service-learning assignment. Good practices are supported by on-campus writing centers, however. Reflective writing in the content areas is usually new both the students and teachers. A writing center

can assist the instructor with developing an assignment and a rubric. In turn, it can help the student complete this activity.

Best practice institutions create opportunities to link service-learning activities to content. Assessment tasks and carefully constructed rubrics that clearly delineate desired learning outcomes for students help inform choices about instruction, as well as to monitor student progress. These assessment tasks, based soundly in reflective writing, measure real learning, thereby showing the full potential of service-learning as a teaching method.

Evaluating Projects

The purpose of educational evaluation is to make decisions about the worth of a particular program in order to improve it as it currently exists or as it might be implemented again in the future. Programs that utilize best practices create evaluation plans that identify the information needed to judge the worth of a particular service-learning project, establish the procedures to be used to collect this information, and create the means to effectively interpret the results (Pritchard and Whitehead 120).

While the central mission of an evaluation process is, of course, deciding if students involved actually accomplished their instructional objectives, it cannot be forgotten that service-learning is reciprocal. Thus, the students, the key target of an assessment plan, are only a part. There are other players, and the impact of an activity on them must be considered.

Evaluating a service-learning project is complex because service-learning is complex. It is a process that involves not only students and faculty, but also

the institution at-large, as well as the community in which the service-learning is performed. Service-learning has important effects on all four of these aspects of the process, and they can and should be measured.

Good evaluation plans can take many forms. No matter what the method or methods used, the evaluation process should flow naturally from curricular objectives. Its form can be quantitative, such as service learning logs, hours of service, number of people served, gains in test scores, or surveys. It also can be qualitative, such as observation, reflection logs, or interviews with key participants. The best plans, though, utilize both measures (Cable in the Classroom website). Ultimately, a good assessment plan provides feedback on the following questions:

- Did students do what they planned to do?
- Did they impact the community need or problem?
- What impact did the service have on the community, school, and students?
- What academic goals were met through the service?
- What did students learn?

The evaluation stage is an important part of the process for the faculty, the students, the college, and the community served. It can give all stakeholders valuable feedback on student learning, as well as the impact of service on those who receive it. Mainly, it provides a basis for developing and improving the program, and documents a program's effectiveness.

Summary

In his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, sociologist Robert D. Putnam asks the question, "What has happened to civic engagement in America"? His disheartening answer is that,

even down to the most basic level—voting, it has all but gone by the wayside. Service-learning is an attempt to combat this growing sense of indifference. It does so by tying civic activity to learning. To be effective, it requires commitment, established goals, a link to learning, and constant evaluation. High quality service-learning projects adhere to all these principles.