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# Where's the Community in Service-Learning Research?

**Nadinne I. Cruz**
*Stanford University*

**Dwight E. Giles, Jr.**
*Vanderbilt University*

*The lack of research on the community dimensions of service-learning is a glaring omission in the literature. Analysis of the causes of this gap indicate that community-focused research is possible and desirable. This article presents a four dimensional model for doing research with community partners on the process and outcomes of community service-learning. The authors argue that the research should focus on the community-university partnership as the unit of analysis and that it should use a participatory action research approach.*

"Where's the community in service-learning research?" This was one of the major questions discussed by leading service-learning researchers and practitioners at a 1997 meeting convened by Campus Compact in Denver. The group's discussion on strategic directions for service-learning research, as well as the authors' conversations on the topic over the years, gave birth to the idea for this article.

Research related to the community represents a relatively recent direction in service-learning research. It is in this context that we focus on three matters. One is the need to understand why the service-learning research literature to date is almost devoid of research that looks at the community either as a dependent or independent variable. The second is that models for and approaches to service-learning research related to the community should adhere to the principle of reciprocity that is a fundamental principle of exemplary service-learning practice. And the third is that we must begin to develop questions, models, studies, and partnerships that will address this significant gap in the literature.

Why has there been so little research focused on "community" in the service-learning literature? The answers to this question are complex, and have political, intellectual, and practical dimensions. And while a comprehensive answer is beyond the scope of this article, there are several parts to the answer that are worth noting because they can inform future research on this topic.

The political dimension is probably the most obvious. Despite the rapid and widespread growth of service-learning research in the last decade, the vast majority of it is related to politically-charged concerns about academic rigor. As an emerging pedagogy whose advocates have opined a sense of marginalization since its beginnings, the demonstration of service-learning's academic value has been the clarion call in research. In fact, most of the research during the 1990s has focused on student learning outcomes. Because research in general is the domain of the academy, the service-learning research agenda has been driven by academic concerns, not only about student learning but also about faculty perceptions of this pedagogy. Thus the focal question has been, "Where's the learning in service-learning?" While this question has been most salient for answering service-learning skeptics, it also has been of concern to practitioners and 'true believers' (See Eyler & Giles, 1999). In addition, funders, seeking to document and evaluate their investments, have made student outcome research a priority in their grant-making.

The intellectual reasons for the paucity of service-learning research pertinent to community are complicated and are derived from American social and intellectual history related to the notion of "community." As a result of progress-inducing inventions and trends such as the automobile, industrialization, suburbanization, and geographic mobility, the very idea of community in American life has been continuously challenged and modified. As early as 1927, John Dewey was writing about the loss of community in America (Dewey, 1946). In the fields of community studies and community development, the pursuit of research about community was largely replaced by discussion of the 'eclipse of community' (Stein, 1960) and attempts to redefine community in ways that locality was not the central theme (Warren, 1978). One of the outcomes of this debate was gen-

eral agreement that if we couldn't define "community" then we couldn't study it. This question of what we mean by "community" continues to baffle scholars across fields of study.

This conundrum is problematic for service-learning research as well. What or who is the community when we refer to this term in the service-learning field? We certainly do not all agree on what we mean when we use this term. For examples, some identify "community" with agency staffers who are service-learning partners or with consumers of the services provided by the agencies at which our students are placed. Yet others construe community as a neighborhood or geographic location, and others may be referring to an intentional or constructed community (See Varlottta, 1996, for an insightful discussion on the community question and the possibilities for service-learning in constructed communities.)

A second aspect to the intellectual problem is a methodological one. Because communities are complex constructs, it is impossible to control for all of the variables that can confound a research study. This makes generalizability, the canon of academic inquiry, difficult if not impossible to establish (A. W. Astin, personal communication, July 15, 2000).

The intellectual problems of definition and validity lead to the third reason that explains the paucity of service-learning research on community — the practical problems. First, if there had been a cry from the community to research "Where's the service in service-learning?," most community partners would not have had the resources to pursue the question. Second, even if the definitional issue of "community" can be settled, community outcomes or impacts research is very difficult to do. As mentioned above, there are so many confounding variables that would make the effects of service-learning efforts on communities difficult to distinguish. Finally, newcomers and veterans of service-learning would agree that service-learning is sufficiently challenging as a pedagogy, and that that alone discourages practitioners from doing research on service-learning in general and on the more challenging research related to community impact in particular. In other words, the lack of research on the service dimension is also partly due to a simple lack of time and know-how.

To address these challenges, we will review the state of research on the value of service-learning for the community, propose an approach for community research, and present an agenda and some examples for including the community in both the process and content of service-learning research. We will argue that the strategic direction for research on the value of service-learning to communities should focus less on evaluating "community outcomes" and more on developing greater skills in using research as a process for sustained collaboration between universities and communities. This research should be used as a means to develop new knowledge and information of value to each, as well as to serve as a tool for "making things happen" within the context of an organized effort to shape the quality of lives of those in the community.

## What Do We Know?: The State of Inquiry Related to the Value of Service-Learning for the Community

While the expanding literature about service-learning offers very little on the impact of service-learning on community, there is a growing voice (though not yet a clamor) for its development. For example, several recent articles urged further research on community perspectives in service-learning, including motivations for participation, outcomes of service activities, and the benefits of service-learning (Edwards & Marullo, 2000; Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998; Gelmon, Holland, & Shinnamon, 1998; Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000; Vernon & Ward, 1999; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). But beyond these kinds of studies, what is the state of inquiry on the value of service-learning for community? To answer this question, we offer a broad brushstroke of the existing literature on the subject.

In a review of the published service-learning literature in higher education from 1993-1999, using rather stringent criteria for inclusion as an empirical study, Eyler, Giles, and Gray (1999) found only eight studies that addressed community outcomes in service-learning. These studies reported satisfaction with student participants, a sense that service-learning provides useful service in communities, and the perception that service-learning enhanced community-university relations.

Much of the empirical literature is a mix of research and program evaluation. Very few studies focus solely on community effects; rather, community is often one variable among others. Also, a significant part of the literature is anecdotal and descriptive.

And while the research on the value of service to community in the service-learning literature is sparse, advocates continue to urge its practice on the basis of its intended value to communities. These claims can be thought of as forming the basis for research questions.

Given all this, we identify below the key findings and the more commonly cited claims about the value of service-learning to communities, categorized and summarized in broad topic areas.

1. *Service-learning contributes to community development*

Key Findings:

- Provides research data for leveraging other funds or grant resources (Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998; Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997)
- Strengthens horizontal linkages by providing networks among community agencies (Gelmon et al., 1998; Miller, 1997)

Key Claims:

- Develops social capital and revitalizes communities (Miller, 1997)
- Presents studies that analyze problems, identify solutions, and promote public action (Miller, 1997; Nyden et al., 1997)
- Builds local capacity for renewal and growth (Lisman, 1998; Miller, 1997; Rothman, 1998)
- Provides opportunities for job training, skills enhancement, and ongoing education (Harkavy, 1997; 1998)
- Builds group solving capacity in community members (Andranovich & Lovrich, 1996; Lisman, 1998; Rothman, 1998)
- Brings community members together and builds trust among them (Andranovich & Lovrich, 1996; Lisman, 1998; Rothman, 1998)
- Offers new forms of interaction among different sectors of society (Harkavy, 1997; 1998)

2. *Service-learning bridges town-gown gaps*

Key Findings:

- Strengthens relationships when partners have campus roles and responsibilities (Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998)
- Informs partners about institutional assets and limitations (Gelmon et al., 1998)
- Enables community to gauge institution's attitude toward their needs (Gelmon et al., 1998; Vernon & Ward, 1999)

Key Claims

- Community regards students in positive light. (Lisman, 1998)
- University is more accessible to community members (Lisman, 1998)
- Community members come on campus to talk with classes about concerns of the community (Lisman, 1998; Vernon & Ward, 1999)

3. *Service-learning offers benefits to community partners*

Key Findings:

- Access to university resources (Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998)
- Budgetary savings (Gelmon et al., 1998)
- Use of the "free" labor of student volunteers with varying skills and expertise (Barton, 1998; Gelmon et al., 1998; Miller, 1997; Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000; Sundar, 1998)
- Appreciation of the energy and enthusiasm of student volunteers (Gelmon et al., 1998; Gray et al, 1999; Vernon & Ward, 1999)
- Better service for clients (Gelmon et al., 1998; Gray et al., 1999)
- Furthered goals of the organization (Gray et al., 1999)
- Contributes to the visibility of the community organization (Gray et al., 1999)
- Played a role in the preparation of future professionals (Gelmon et al., 1998; Vernon & Ward, 1999)

Key Claims:

- Community members gain access to research and knowledge within the university (Nyden, Figert, Shibley, & Burrows, 1997)
- University provides community with various resources (human, economic, etc.) (Harkavy, 1998)
- Community forms potential working relationships with students (Gelmon et al., 1998)
- "Neighborly communities" are developed (Harkavy, 1997; 1998)

All of the key claims statements above can pass the test of being "empirically verifiable" through research studies, though some are more complex and would require more time and expertise than the present conventional practice of annual program evaluation and performance assessment.

## Toward a New Approach

In addition to the explanations for the sparse record in service-learning research on community, there exists the conundrum that such research requires a constituency that demands it, or is at least motivated enough to develop it. Unfortunately, it is neither self-evident who comprises that constituency nor what their demands would look like if one exists. The intuitive response is to declare that surely it is "community" that wants it, demands it, and is highly motivated to see it happen. After all, we are talking about research on value to community. However, this in itself is a fairly untested assumption.

Alternatively, we propose an approach that avoids

imposing research on the community or cajoling the community to take research seriously because our grant requires it or our higher education institution or service-learning community would like it. The approach we present here addresses issues regarding constituency as well as questions of scientific validity and who or what is the community. This four-part model synthesizes several other approaches and elements of service-learning research and practice described in other articles in this publication, including Stanton's call for practitioner involvement in research, Shumer's new paradigm argument, and Harkavy, Puckett, and Romer's advocacy for action research.

*1. The partnership as the unit of analysis.* Instead of continuing the seemingly fruitless pursuit of the question of geographic versus social community, we propose that the university-community partnership itself be the unit of analysis. This is based on the assumption that the partnership is the infrastructure that facilitates the service and learning and is both an intervening variable in studying certain learning and service "impacts" as well as an outcome or "impact" in itself. The partnership as the unit of analysis not only solves the problem of "community" but also provides a framework for generalization across communities. The properties of the partnerships can be known and examined for changes or impacts in service and learning. The fundamental questions would include: Is the partnership better now with service-learning than it was before without service-learning? Alternatively, are service and/or learning better because of the quality of the partnership? Operationalizing better partnerships would focus on access to resources and increased community access to assets. An example of principles of partnerships which is beginning to be used by a number of institutions can be found in Seifer and Maurana (1999).

*2. Consistency with good service-learning practice principles.* This new model takes seriously the principles of good practice espoused by Sigmon (1979) and Honnet and Poulsen (1989) regarding community input, reciprocity, and partnership, but would extend those principles to the process of evaluation and research. A partnership dimension would itself be part of the research process for the purpose of improving both service and learning, as defined initially by each party and then, ultimately, by both. An example of how this would change basic approaches to research would be in shifting the language of research from 'research subjects' to research partners.

*3. Use of action research.* Elsewhere in this volume Harkavy, Puckett, and Romer make a strong case for action research. We are convinced that this approach, both as a philosophy and a method, provides the best data while avoiding doing any harm to the community relationships that we are trying to nurture as well as study. Basic characteristics of this approach are a commitment to community needs, engagement with the community so goals are defined in their own voice, and a moral commitment to transform injustice in the community (Petras & Porpora, 1993).

*4. Focus on assets.* Asset-based community development is currently popular in many community development and service-learning projects. It is based on the premise that the first step in any community program is to map the assets of the community rather than to conduct a needs assessment (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). This simple idea shifts the view of community from a deficit perspective to a resource perspective. Instead of asking what does a community need and focusing on its deficiencies, this approach asks what a community has that can be further developed and utilized by the community. We would extend this asset-identification model to the community-university partnership so as to focus on the mutual exchange and net gain in assets. For research purposes this can be thought of as a way to do pre-/post-assessment, both for better practice and richer data. The central research questions for this dimension are, Has there been an increase in net community assets? and Has the service-learning initiative contributed to the asset gain? An additional question is the extent to which the college or university has contributed its assets to the community partnership.

## Some Examples

Even though we are presenting the synthesis of these four principles as the foundation for a new model, we suspect that a number of existing efforts already approximate this model. First of all this is not a question unique to service-learning; grant-making foundations are struggling, too, with the question of identifying community change as a result of social intervention programs (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1999; Connell, Kubisch, Schorr, & Weiss, 1995; Petersen, 1998).

One service-learning example that stands out is the comprehensive evaluation model developed at Portland State University (PSU) in which community is one of four areas of assessment, receiving equal emphasis with faculty, students and the institution (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996). While not exactly a participatory action research (PAR) approach, it is very community "friendly" for acknowledging the importance of community-university partnerships and community stakeholders.

The PSU model was further developed in the evaluation of the first national service-learning demonstration program in a set of disciplines, the

Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN) program (Gelmon, Holland, & Shinnamon, 1998). In this example, community impact was the focus of a specific research question, and the community voice played a key role in the evaluation (Gelmon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998). In fact, it was because of this awareness of impact of community that a new national organization was established, Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, whose mission is to promote the role of community-university interactions both in education and in community health improvement (see their web site at: futurehealth.ucsf.edu/ccph.htm). In both the PSU and HPSISN examples, a key outcome was the development of a workbook of public domain assessment instruments which could be used, among other purposes, for the assessment of community impact (Driscoll, Gelmon, Holland, Kerrigan, Spring, Grisvold, & Longley, 1998; Shinnamon, Gelmon, & Holland, 1999).

A new model that is currently being revised and further tested is the *3-I Model* developed by Melinda Clarke at Vanderbilt University (2000).[1] Drawing on the literature on service-learning research, program evaluation, and community change, this model meets our four criteria for looking at processes of, as well as changes in, partnerships and community assets. The 3 I's — Initiator, Initiative, and Impacts — represent the stages and dimensions of the model. The Initiator stage looks at the actor(s) who initiated the program or project, goals, development of the partnership, shared understandings, and the development of a knowledge base that can be used to gauge change. The Initiative stage focuses on the process of the project, the degree to which indicators were built into the design and implementation of the project, and the extent to which the indicators were connected to the goals and intended outcomes. The third stage is Impact, the traditional focus of most community evaluations, and looks at the extent to which the implementation strategies served the intended outcomes and the extent to which the goals were met.

The piloting of this new 3-I Model used multi-method data gathering through participant observation, surveys, interviews and focus groups. Unfortunately, the project which was used as the basis for a field test of the model was already underway, so the data gathering was not built in at the beginning of the project. Further testing and development of the model could also include a more intentional participatory action research approach, and could determine if this framework, that is based on evaluation and theory of change approaches, could be built into an asset-based, participatory action research framework. This would then potentially integrate the research and the service-learning activities into a seamless whole.

## Research as Service-Learning Practice

Clearly we need to break new ground in order to develop research on the community dimension of service-learning. There are also many obstacles to overcome, including the conundrum of defining "community" and the lack of a strong constituency whose interests are served by research on community impact in service-learning. We have suggested one possible approach using the community-university partnership as the unit of analysis, focusing on assets, conducting participatory action research, and applying service-learning principles of good practice in the ways by which research itself is conducted. This path would favor research for the purpose of improving service-learning practice (both the learning and community service dimensions) instead of "basic research" primarily for scientific discovery. We are not opposed to the latter, but in considering the scarcity of resources, time, and capacity, we think it is currently more strategic and fruitful to conduct research on community impact as a seamless part of the process of building a university-community partnership for achieving shared goals which neither could accomplish without the other. This direction would include developing new knowledge and creating processes of discovery that are in constant dialogue with the effort to literally and concretely achieve a given set of "community impacts" and to learn from the effort. This approach to research on the community dimension would itself be infused by the claim often invoked about service-learning — "service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both" (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989) — and which we paraphrase in this way: "Research [on community impact] integrated with service and learning strengthens each and enhances all."

## Notes

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[1] Melinda Clarke can be contacted at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee.

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## Authors

NADINNE I. CRUZ is Director of the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University and co-author with Timothy K. Stanton and Dwight Giles, Jr. of *Service-Learning: A Movement's Pioneers Reflect on Its Origins, Practice, and Future.* Cruz also directs the Public Service Scholars Program for seniors who conduct research both to fulfill honors theses requirements in their majors and to apply research as service to community.

DWIGHT E. GILES, JR. is Professor of the Practice of Human and Organizational Development and Director of Internships at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. He is a member of the Campus Compact — American Association of Higher Education Service-Learning Consulting Corps, and the National Review Board for the Scholarship of Engagement. His scholarship focuses on community development and experiential learning. He has authored and co-authored numerous articles and monographs and two books on service-learning research. Beginning in January 2001, he will be a Senior Associate at the New England Resource Center for Higher Education and a Professor of Higher Education Administration at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.