

## Challenges in Assessing Service-Learning

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*Service-learning as a pedagogy offers multiple perspectives from which assessment can be conducted, and provides a rich opportunity for comprehensive and value-added assessment. Development of a comprehensive research agenda to build knowledge about service-learning assessment and refine concepts of best practices for assessment will provide the evidence needed to further develop and implement programs and pedagogies that fulfill the missions and expectations of service-learning.*

Service-learning in higher education is often undertaken as a new initiative within the college or university, and as such may be subject to considerable scrutiny. What is this new program? Does it result in better student outcomes? What skills and abilities do faculty need to structure and guide high quality service-learning experiences? Will service-learning change the institution? What will be the impact on community partners and partnerships? Is it worth the investment? Will other programs suffer because resources are diverted to service-learning? These kinds of questions are asked even when service-learning is well-established on a campus.

With such questions being asked, one would assume that assessment of service-learning efforts is an integral part of understanding the impact of these efforts. Yet in contrast to the scope of service-learning programs and activities, relatively little assessment evidence has been developed. This gap suggests a significant research agenda specifically addressing assessment studies — not only learning about outcomes of service-learning, but learning about different aspects of service-learning that can be assessed and developing new methods for conducting such assessments.

### What Do We Know About the Topic?

Much of the discussion of assessment of student learning has built upon the early work conducted at Alverno College, where faculty began to use the term “assessment” to describe the process of measuring a set of student abilities (such as communication, analysis, and problem-solving) that were identified as essential in student learning (Loacker & Mentkowski, 1993). While much of the literature about assessment continues to emphasize student learning, increasingly institutions frame assessment as an integral part of their continuous improvement strategy. This broader perspective emphasizes the

entire educational purpose of the institution or academic unit from a mission-driven perspective. In this context, assessment can be defined as “the process of collecting, organizing, and interpreting data for the purposes of determining to what degree the educational program is meeting its established mission, goals, and objectives” (Gelmon & Reagan, 1994, p. 4). Banta emphasizes that assessment must be linked with ongoing practices such as institutional planning, curricular review, student development programs, and comprehensive peer review processes, all of which are integral to academic life (1992). Assessment can make a difference when it is embedded in a framework for understanding and implementing organizational change (Schilling & Schilling, 1993).

Assessment is concerned with learning — and it involves collective faculty learning to understand and influence institutional change (Hutchings & Marchese, 1990). Research on assessment needs to address collective learning about what assessment is, what it contributes to the academic enterprise, how it is conducted, what methods have proved successful, and what future directions might be pursued. Assessment itself is a process that depends upon formulating questions and developing evidence to answer those questions. While this process may seem similar to “education research” or “program evaluation,” the primary emphasis in assessment is twofold: 1) on learning about learning, and 2) on using that learning for short-term as well as long-term program improvement.

Assessment of service-learning activities helps program leaders to articulate for themselves what they have learned, as well as to develop comprehensive evidence to share with others (Shinnamon, Gelmon & Holland, 1999). Articulating one’s own learning can help to focus thinking to delineate issues, describe strategies, and highlight opportuni-

ties for further work and improvement. Articulating learning for others helps to share lessons learned and ideas about successes and challenges, so that others may benefit and learn.

Why do we do assessments? The primary reason is often to provide immediate feedback to enable program leaders to make incremental changes during the program, responding to needs and concerns. On a longer term, assessment data can provide the basis for program planning and for redesign and improvement. Assessments increasingly are called for by funding agencies — provision of evidence of the value received for the money invested in a program or a grant. Almost all accrediting agencies (both institutional/regional and specialized/professional) have instituted explicit requirements for documentation of explicit assessment processes and evidence of routine use of assessment data. With ever-increasing calls for accountability, and particularly for resource accountability, there are regular demands for clear assessment data.

How does one begin the assessment process? Many of the general stories in the literature about individual assessment experiences document the methods used to build buy-in for assessment [see for example the various chapters in Gray & Banta (1997) or Banta & Associates (1993)]. These experiences illustrate the need to consider assessment in program planning, along with issues of programmatic goals, activities, timelines, participants and sustainability. Perhaps the biggest challenge is that many individuals are not comfortable with assuming the role of assessor. It is key that there be an aim and a stated purpose for the assessment, and that this is articulated at the outset. Is the assessment mandated by a funder, is it part of an accreditation or regulatory review, or is it tied to an individual's personal performance review? Different needs will determine different sorts of assessment data. Assessment of service-learning may be a routine part of other assessment activities, or may be specifically tied to curriculum review of the service-learning methodology or to a grant that is supporting the service-learning initiative.

What is already evident in the assessment literature? Elsewhere in this monograph are specific essays on the service-learning research agenda regarding impact on students, faculty, community, and the institution. Articles by Eyler, Driscoll, Holland, Astin, Cruz and Giles, Kahne and Westheimer, and Chesler and Scalera all highlight various studies addressing such areas of impact, and each has relevance for assessment strategies. While these various approaches are useful, they tend to focus on one constituency only, and thus do not provide a comprehensive picture of the impact of ser-

vice-learning. A pioneering, multi-constituency approach to assessment of service-learning was developed at Portland State University (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon & Kerrigan, 1996). It explicitly assesses the multiple areas of impact of service-learning on students, faculty, the institution, and the community. Developed further for the Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN) program, this application of the methodology added the component of community partnerships as a fifth area of focus for assessment (Gelmon, Holland & Shinnamon, 1998). In both cases the goal of the assessment was to learn about the implementation of service-learning and its differential impact on various constituencies, and to identify lessons learned for future service-learning implementation efforts.

Another aim of assessment in service-learning can be to examine the role of organizational issues and community outcomes in understanding the impact of service-learning. This strategy was employed in the Interdisciplinary Professional Education Collaborative, in which the aim of the assessment was to understand the impact of an interdisciplinary team approach to strengthening health and health care through community-based efforts and service-learning using continuous improvement methods (Gelmon & Barnett, 1999).

Each of these three approaches uses a matrix/multiple method model that includes four components: question, concept, evidence and measurement (Shinnamon, Gelmon, & Holland, 1999). The broad area of interest is stated in the research question — for example “How has the service-learning project affected community-university partnerships?” A matrix is used as the basis for the assessment for each research question, consisting of information for each of the steps. The question is followed by articulation of a set of specific key concepts (or variables) that reflect the area of expected impact — “what will we look for?” With community-university partnerships, the concepts might include establishment of partnerships, role of partners, and communication, for example. The researchers then ask “what will be measured or observed?,” and identify measurable indicators with multiple indicators for each concept. “Establishment of partnerships” might be measured by indicators such as number, duration, and function. The “role of partners” might be assessed by examining specific activities of partners in areas such as teaching, program planning, collaborative research, and field supervision. The final step is to ask the measurement questions — “what method(s) will be used for the measurement/observation?,” “what/who will be the source of the information?,” and “when will the measurement/observation occur?” Methods such

as surveys, interviews, focus groups, structured reflections, observations, critical incident identification, and review of documentation are selected as appropriate, and various sources (students, faculty, institutional representatives, community partners, etc.) are identified.

A sample matrix is presented in Table 1 below. It should be noted that a single measurement or observation method can provide information on multiple indicators and, therefore, about single or multiple core concepts. For example, an interview with a community partner, as illustrated, could provide information about both the core concept of "establishment of partnerships" and "role of partners." Similarly, individual sources may provide input through multiple methods in order to gain as broad an assessment as possible. Using the example again, students might be surveyed after a service-learning experience and also might participate in a focus group.

Breaking the assessment into clear steps helps to articulate the specific goals of the assessment and to focus data collection on those items that can clearly be tracked to a specific concept and focus for the assessment. Since many individuals involved in service-learning focus entirely on creating and delivering the service-learning experience, and do not have the resources or motivation to assess the various effects of the service-learning activity, the service-learning research agenda must address assessment.

### Principles of Good Practice for Service-Learning Assessment

Over the past decade, work on assessment in higher education has contributed to development of

a set of "good practices" for assessment (AAHE, 1992; Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996). These have evolved and in time have been validated as guidelines for successful assessment activities (Banta 1997). While initially formulated for the assessment of student learning, these principles can be restated (with some editorial and content modifications) to reflect a commitment to improvement and can be relevant to any kind of assessment activity in higher education, including service-learning. The principles can provide the basis for framing an assessment agenda for service-learning, in comparison with a research agenda.

1. *Assessment begins with articulation of values and a clear aim.* A service-learning assessment should have an aim that emphasizes the scope and intent of the assessment, and clearly frames the parameters of the assessment.
2. *Assessment works best when the programs/activities it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.* As with #1 above, the statement of purpose of the service-learning program or activity can assist in defining the scope of the assessment, the audience to whom results will be reported, and the motivations underlying the assessment initiative. Such a focus can help to avoid becoming entangled in assessments that are so broad and unwieldy as to produce little meaningful and timely information.
3. *Assessment makes a difference when it illuminates the answers to the questions that people involved truly care about.* Building upon clear aim and purposes will lead to articulation of

TABLE 1  
*An Assessment Matrix*

Core Concepts	Key Indicators	Methods	Sources
Establishment of partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of partnerships</li> <li>• Duration</li> <li>• Functions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey</li> <li>• Interview</li> <li>• Document review</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partners</li> <li>• Institutional administrators</li> <li>• Service-learning coordinators</li> <li>• Institutional records</li> </ul>
Role of partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement in teaching</li> <li>• Participation in program planning</li> <li>• Collaborative research activities</li> <li>• Field supervision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document review</li> <li>• Survey</li> <li>• Focus group</li> <li>• Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partners</li> <li>• Students</li> <li>• Faculty</li> <li>• Institutional records</li> </ul>

specific questions to frame the assessment — questions that are important and for which people want answers. Faculty, administrators, community partners and students committed to service-learning usually have a “passion” for this work, and will have specific questions they would like answered.

4. *Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning (student learning, faculty learning, organizational learning, etc.) as multidimensional, integrated and revealed in performance over time.* Assessment is about learning, so therefore assessment of service-learning should be about this method. The assessment should provide snapshots of the service-learning activities at multiple points in time (in comparison to summative research studies that report only at the end of a series of activities).
5. *Assessment works best when it is ongoing and framed in the spirit of continuous improvement, rather than episodic.* Assessment cannot be an episodic point-in-time activity if it is to be truly helpful; it offers the opportunity to study and improve on a continuous basis through routine data collection and interpretation. In the case of service-learning, this may be a challenge as the individual student’s service-learning experiences may be fragmented across a course of study; however, this suggests use of methods (such as portfolios) that help the student (or faculty) to assess and document activities over time.
6. *Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences, the underlying organizational structures, and the processes of delivery that lead to those outcomes.* Service-learning assessment needs to adopt a multi-constituency approach in order to address all aspects of program development, delivery, products and experiences. It can provide timely information for improvement of any of these components. Attention to multiple facets of an activity at multiple points in time can provide a continuous full-range (or 360 degree) analysis.
7. *Assessment fosters the most substantial improvement when participants from across the educational community (both internal and external stakeholders) are involved.* The service-learning assessment research agenda must be designed to incorporate the multiple perspectives of all participants in service-learning, and at multiple points in time. The assessment needs to be framed to place equal value on

these multiple perspectives (such as students, faculty, community, institution, etc.) in order to answer the questions defined as the basis of the assessment.

8. *Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is integrated with other activities that promote self-evaluation and change.* Assessment should be viewed as an integrated part of routine activities, and not as a stand-alone function. Just as course evaluations have become standard practice, so should a range of assessment activities be developed and integrated into activities such as course assessment, program review, faculty review for promotion and tenure, and programmatic or institutional preparation for accreditation or other external review. Assessments of service-learning can be built in to student, faculty, or other methods of self-evaluation and change.
9. *Through assessment, educators meet their responsibilities to students, themselves, their institutions, and the public at large.* A major driver of assessment is accountability; thus it is incumbent upon those engaged in assessment to report and share their findings widely. Service-learning builds upon issues of community accountability, and it is particularly vital that the assessment findings are shared and communicated in order to learn from the results and use these for development of future service-learning activities.
10. *Assessment is most effective when undertaken in an environment that is receptive, supportive and enabling.* Assessment must be embraced by leaders as an important activity, and must be clearly communicated throughout the organization to encourage buy-in to the process and receptivity to the findings. It is not sufficient to just “do” service-learning; rather, there must be easily accessible evidence of the impact of the service-learning, and clear demonstration that attention is given to assessment and an understanding of this impact throughout the service-learning program.

### **What Do We Need to Know to Develop the Service-Learning Research Agenda?**

From these ideas about best practices for service-learning assessment, a series of questions may be suggested for framing the service-learning research agenda for assessment. These questions relate to the focus of assessment and to ways that different assessment strategies and methodologies may increase our understanding of how assessment can be used and

how learning is generated.

*What can be learned about assessment strategies for understanding the impact of service-learning on students?* One of the biggest challenges in articulating the service-learning research agenda around assessment is the fact that the focus of assessment is often affected by many forces in addition to the service-learning experience. In understanding the impact of service-learning on students, for example, the assessment design must recognize and account for other pedagogies, other experiences, certain social factors, and multiple other variables in students' lives. Assessment of impact on students in the present may be feasible, but longitudinal studies present challenges in attempts to establish causality in relating factors such as career choice to a service-learning experience. Thus a clear assessment question relates to creative designs and methods that will enable the assessment of impact of service-learning over time (five, ten or even fifteen years after the service-learning experience) with careful accounting for various intervening and confounding variables. There must be clear delineation of the role of the confounding variables as well as the careful design of longitudinal studies.

*Does assessment of the impact of service-learning on faculty require different assessment methodologies than those used for other pedagogies?* A similar assessment challenge rests with understanding the impact of service-learning on faculty. How is the impact of this pedagogy assessed separately from the impact of other experiences with learning communities, interdisciplinary teams, or other teaching methods? How can the impact of faculty development efforts focused on service-learning be assessed when there are ramifications for other kinds of faculty involvement in teaching and learning? What methods can be used to understand faculty involvement in service-learning as it relates to rewards, motivation and other incentives embedded in the distinct organizational cultures of various higher education institutions? Each of these questions suggests complex assessment methods that will enrich our understanding of service-learning while also broadening our general knowledge of various aspects of faculty life in higher education.

*What are the lessons from community development and other cognate disciplines that can inform assessment strategies for studying community involvement in service-learning?* How do we measure community voice in higher education, community involvement, and community impact? Is there a difference in assessing the impact of community-university partnerships on the community as compared to the impact on both the community and the institution? What techniques can be borrowed from the study of community development and of social networks to

assess the multiple kinds of impact of service-learning on community? These areas of assessment are likely to involve the engagement of researchers who not only study service-learning but also bring knowledge of a range of other assessment strategies from the study of communities.

*What strategies can be built upon to assess institutional roles and institutional learning as a result of service-learning?* Institutional research plays a key role in these assessments, but may need to broaden its horizons to account for the multiple dimensions of impact found with service-learning. Can data be collected on a routine basis through existing institutional research structures, and in turn can it be assessed in ways that will help researchers understand the impact of service-learning? Is there already considerable data collected, or mechanisms in place for augmenting existing data collection methods, that can be of immediate use in understanding service-learning? Or does the desire to assess institutional impact require establishment of new institutional structures and data banks to collect, analyze and use relevant information?

*How does assessment become part of daily work?* Perhaps the greatest assessment challenge is in convincing faculty members and other higher education colleagues that assessment can and should be part of daily work to inform routine activities. Regular assessment can provide immediate feedback to make changes (such as through use of various classroom assessment techniques), can document program activities to demonstrate accountability to funders, can aid in program planning and development, and can provide the feedback for program improvement. To demonstrate the value and necessity of assessment, concrete case studies are needed that document the use of assessment strategies in routine program development and delivery, such as through implementation of continuous improvement strategies. Specific examples will help to make the case that assessment is not a burdensome "add-on" or "busy work" but rather a value-added activity.

### **How Might We Accomplish This Agenda?**

Assessment is an increasingly important topic for educators as they face public concerns about accountability, changes in educational strategies (such as service-learning), the interests of accreditors and other regulatory bodies and funding organizations, and needs for data-driven decision-making to complement a commitment to improvement. Service-learning as an educational methodology may be challenged or questioned without strong evidence of the benefits and merits of this methodology — and sound assessment approaches are necessary to provide that evidence. Although experiences with assessment at Portland State University and in other

programs illustrate how methods can be used for assessment, further exploration of new strategies to expand the repertoire of appropriate assessment methods is needed to provide lessons learned and identify best practices in assessment for the field.

As always, resources will be needed to build knowledge about assessment and to provide incentives for individuals to commit time and energy to comprehensive assessment strategies. Funding from governmental agencies, associations, and foundations is advantageous. Some funders explicitly require comprehensive program evaluations that integrate clear assessment strategies; others are relatively unwilling to commit limited resources to assessment at the expense of program delivery or service provision. Without support, individuals may lack the motivation to make a strong commitment to assessment. Sadly, in such circumstances the end product lacks the reflection and thought regarding lessons learned and strategies for future activities that inevitably result from a thoughtful and thorough assessment process.

Information dissemination is also critical to demonstrate various approaches to assessment, to share strategies and learning about what works, and to provide models that can be adopted and replicated. A valuable resource exists in workbooks of tested and validated methods and tools that are adaptable for local purposes (such as Driscoll, Gelmon, Holland, Kerrigan, Longley, & Spring, 1998; Shinnamon, Gelmon & Holland, 1999). Such resources can be put on line and become more easily accessed. For example, a web-accessible version of the workbook originally developed at Portland State University will be available through national Campus Compact and AAHE in late 2000. In time a bank of instruments from various experiences and institutions could be available to assist both new and established researchers in the assessment of service-learning initiatives.

Scholarly journals and meetings can also provide a valuable vehicle for dissemination with calls for papers emphasizing not only the service-learning programs themselves, but also the assessment strategies developed, methods of implementation, models of tools, and illustrations of uses of findings. In addition to the general higher education meetings, disciplinary associations could provide a venue for dissemination to facilitate more rapid transmission of learning and encourage faculty who are resistant to assessment. It is much easier to commit to assessment if one has tools in hand, rather than if one needs to develop these tools.

Development of a research agenda around assessment requires developing further expertise in assessment. In recent years an increasing number of conference sessions have focused on service-learning

assessment (such as at the American Association for Higher Education and at Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, and increasingly through various disciplinary associations participating in the AAHE disciplinary initiatives). In many of these sessions, however, attendees are often seeking basic information about getting started with service-learning program design and implementation, and sometimes are not ready to hear about assessment strategies. Organizations invested in service-learning promotion need to continue to address assessment issues in order to provide venues for the sharing of assessment experiences and to develop a broader cadre of individuals with assessment expertise. New initiatives, such as the AAHE Service-Learning Consulting Corps and the National Review Board on the Scholarship of Engagement, can provide assessment assistance to the higher education community. This is an area where basic knowledge of assessment can be shared, but real skill will only be developed with experience and practice.

A final strategy for promoting research on the assessment of service-learning would be the creation of a learning collaborative of scholars specifically interested in assessment who are willing to work and learn together to move the assessment agenda forward. As service-learning continues to gain prominence as one method for institutions to become "engaged" in their communities, educators responsible for promoting this engagement will need the skills and expertise to assess the impacts of service-learning. This new assessment learning collaborative would be a valuable resource to the higher education community and could experiment with new methods of information dissemination (in particular through web-based and other interactive technologies). As a collaborative, emphasis would be placed on collective learning and best practices rather than just on individual scholarship or individual institutional experience.

Assessment provides needed evidence about structural components of programs, methods of program development and delivery, and short and long-term impacts of activities. Service-learning as a pedagogy offers multiple perspectives from which assessment can be conducted, and provides a rich opportunity for comprehensive and value-added assessment. Development of a comprehensive research agenda to build knowledge about service-learning assessment and refine concepts of best practices for assessment will provide the evidence needed to further develop and implement programs and pedagogies that fulfill the missions and expectations of service-learning.

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