Supporting the Success of Service Learning Initiatives in Higher Education

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Why service learning?

- Applied educational opportunities
- Technical skills with a social mission
- Demonstration of global impact

Motivation: A learning experience

From a university's perspective, service learning provides an opportunity for broader impact but generally there must also be a “learning” component.

How do we strike a balance between the needs of the community and the needs of the students?

Research questions for our work

- Does participation in service learning such as EWB-USA contribute to a culture of ethical STEM practice?
- Do participants from service learning projects experience their STEM education in a qualitatively different way than those who do not?
- How can we learn from the on-ground experiences of students and faculty to identify and promote best practices in humanitarian service learning for a more ethically aware STEM culture?
- Who is the primary client or beneficiary of SL?
- What is the balance between helping a community versus or contrasted to student experiences?

What we do

- A study methodology
 - <https://www.ewb.org.au/jhe/index.php/jhe/article/view/47>
- Curriculum integration
- Learning assessment
- Report review
- Case study (Ecuador)
- Interviews and focus groups
 - 42 students, 12 faculty, 12 professional volunteers/mentors

Balancing (sometimes) competing objectives

- Ensuring that university service learning work does not negatively impact vulnerable communities
- Take advantage of positive influence over student opinions towards community service and career expectations

How is the work carried out?

- Many institutions rely on student organizations to carry out service learning work
- Disjointed efforts of faculty

Big takeaway so far?

The work of creating and maintaining service learning opportunities is largely unsupported.

For both faculty and students

For faculty

- Overseeing a service learning opportunity seldom fits cleanly into teaching, research, or service.
- Often not recognized in Tenure and Promotion or even considered a detriment.
- Even in cases where service learning is part of curriculum and teaching workload, responsibilities generally exceed typical expectations of teaching a course.

For students

- Students have little control over demands on their time, leading to difficulty setting aside time for voluntary activities.
- Students report having to sacrifice academics and social life to achieve success in service learning projects.
- Ability to participate often associated with privileges of not needing to work outside of school and having strong support systems.
- Opportunities for continuing service learning work after graduation are limited.
- Real career impact seldom realized.

So what to do?

Recommendations for Institutions

- Develop clear policies and procedures for establishment and administration of these programs, including institutional and departmental expectations
- Gauge level of institutional commitment: Will there be staffing? Administrative support? Course reduction for faculty?
- Establish sustainable support, including financial, programmatic, and meritorious (promotion/tenure); failures reported due to lack of sustained funding or poorly integrated programs
- Establish clear objectives and assessment measures for service learning programs—both for students and for faculty/staff
- Establish a clear succession plan for student and faculty participants. Efforts succeed or fail based on solid succession planning

Recommendations for Institutions

- Work closely with university relations to share information on service learning publicly
- Establish budget realities and work with accounting units to ensure all are clear on the intricacies of service learning costs (for example, consider how funds can be used to provide community gifts; use of cash is the norm; receipts are often not available)
- Connect with University Foundation and work towards endowment or gift funding
- Acknowledge gender differences in service learning work—female faculty reported less support than male faculty members for their participation in service learning

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