Getting the Most Out of Service Learning: Maximizing Student, University and Community Impact

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Service learning has become a very popular pedagogical approach for enhancing student learning at institutions of higher education across the United States by involving students in community service as a part of their educational experience. However, despite the vast number of service-learning efforts at universities across the nation, there is often little attention to the intended and actual results of the service learning. A growing body of literature calls for more attention to the impacts of service-learning efforts. Some service-learning experiences may actually reinforce negative or counterproductive attitudes among students. Many efforts fall short of maximizing the potential social change impact of the service and learning activity. We review and compare some of the various ways that service learning impacts has been discussed and measured in the literature. We propose that intentionally aiming for impact at three levels—on students, on the academic institution, and on the community—may be the key to making the most of any service-learning project. We further describe and draw lessons from a pilot project that build toward greater service-learning impact at our school of social work.

KEYWORDS Service learning, experiential learning, social justice, university–community partnerships

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INTRODUCTION

As interest in service learning increases at institutions of higher education across the country (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Butin, 2006; Jacoby, 1996), the idea of engaging students in service activities outside the classroom as a part of their education might seem to offer an irrefutable benefit to both student learning and community well-being. However, there are increasing concerns about the number of activities that are referred to as service learning without more clarity about how service learning is to be understood and practiced, as well as on what its intended impact should be (see, for example, Butin, 2003; Sheffield, 2005). Depending on its implementation, service learning can actually reinforce stereotypes and paternalistic attitudes (Cipolle, 2004; Hess, Laning, & Vaughan, 2007; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; O’Grady 2000; Pompa, 2002; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Furthermore, the impact of the learning experience on the student might not be maximized and sustained if the service does not include a well-crafted opportunity for reflection and integration with academic content (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Hess et al., 2007; Petkus, 2000; Wallace, 2000). In addition, service learning is often implemented with a sole focus on the potential beneficial impact on the student, with little or no emphasis on the possible longer-term beneficial impact on those served by the activity and their broader community (Mitchell, 2008; Robinson, 2000; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Furthermore, although service-learning activities can promote goodwill and a positive image for universities, there is often little attention to learning about ways that institutional structures and practices might actually hinder more equitable and mutually-beneficially relationships between the institution and the community (Boyle, 2007; Marullo & Edwards, 2000).

This article reviews various ways to conceive of service learning and its intended impact. Our goal is to consider how best to achieve the most substantial and broadly-beneficial outcomes from a service experience. Our review of the literature considers several approaches to service learning, proceeding from those aimed at the most narrow potential impact to those that prioritize broader benefits. Building on the work of those authors who have pushed the concept of service-learning impact the furthest, we suggest that students, faculty, and universities as a whole could stand to benefit as they engage with residents and other community members to understand the broader context and structural causes of pressing social problems and to seek large-scale community change. To empirically ground our conceptual propositions, we present, as a case study, a pilot project at our graduate school of social work that is laying the groundwork for a long-term commitment to the implementation and rigorous study of service learning. We use our pilot project experience to draw insights and lessons about the potential and challenges of maximizing the impact of service learning.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Based on our review of literature in various academic disciplines (i.e. social work, education, and business) that have conceptualized and implemented service learning as an important pedagogical approach in higher education, we have selected four approaches that illustrate different primary goals for service-learning impact (see Table 1). Although each approach shares a basic commitment to enhancing student learning through experiences beyond lectures and class discussions, they range quite widely in their core priorities in terms of intended targets and outcomes.

At its most basic level, service learning focuses squarely on impacting students through providing a service experience that will expand and enhance classroom instruction. The other approaches to service learning build on this objective, expanding the intended impact on students and broadening the impact to include other target beneficiaries. Social justice service learning has a specific focus on shaping and deepening the student’s moral values and sense of civic responsibility. Critical service learning seeks to foster longer-term social change through the service activity. Finally, service learning with institutional change raises the importance of impact on

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the academic institution itself. In the remainder of this section, we examine each of these approaches in more detail.

Service Learning: Starting With a Focus on Students

In its traditional form, service learning is focused primarily on student learning as a “pedagogical process whereby students participate in course-relevant community service to enhance their learning experience” (Petkus, 2000, p. 64; see also, Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Eyler, 2002). Drawing on Dewey’s (1938) seminal work that established an educational pedagogy embedded in experience, service learning has become the principle mechanism for putting students in a more active and engaged role than that of a passive classroom learner.

Service-learning advocates propose several ways in which students can be impacted through the experience. The Association for Higher Education states that service learning enhances citizenship skills by allowing concepts of private good and public good to be integrated into learning (Godfrey & Grasso, 2000). Service learning can promote altruism and community service among students (Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Forte, 1997), counter isolation of learning from the real world (Eyler & Giles, 1999), and facilitate social problem-solving by meeting community needs (Boyer, 1994). An additional benefit, in many cases, is that students develop cultural competence and the ability to interact with various ethnic and cultural groups (Flannery & Ward, 1999).

In reviewing the literature, Boyle (2007) found that, although there is widespread belief in the multiple benefits of service learning to students, there is limited evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness. Some evidence shows that service learning has modest positive effects on students’ psychological, social, and cognitive development (Batchelder & Root, 1994). Students taking service-learning courses reported becoming more compassionate, having a greater understanding and ability to solve social problems, and a greater efficacy to make the world better than students who had not participated in service learning (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008). This is consistent with changes found by Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, and Ilustre (2002) in students’ attitudes, where those engaged in service learning showed expected changes in civic attitudes, skills for community engagement, and projected plans to be involved in future civic activities.

Possible Negative Impacts on Students

Besides the lack of clearly defined outcomes and evidence of impact on students, a more fundamental critique in the literature is that service learning can actually work at cross-purposes to its beneficial aspirations. When
conceived of simply as charity work, service learning can reinforce stereotypes and paternalism among students (Cipolle, 2004; Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Some scholars (e.g., Hess et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2008; O’Grady 2000; Pompa, 2002; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000) argue that many applications of service learning do little to question the role of the students as providers of resources and community members as dependents on their assistance. When applied in this way, the impact of service learning can be to “reinforce the idea of privilege and power within society and sustain the hegemonic power of the elite” (Hess et al., 2007, p. 33). Boyle (2007) identified numerous possible unintended consequences of service learning, especially when dynamics of cultural differences between students and those served are not addressed, including increased racial prejudice, confirmed stereotypes, a sense of superiority, blaming of the victim rather than empathy, and apathy about social change (Boyle, 2007).

To avoid these potential negative impacts, many service-learning advocates emphasize the requirement of proper preparation and reflection (Fertman, 1994; see also Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Wallace, 2000). What some refer to as experiential service learning makes explicit the importance of deep reflection on the part of the students as an integral component of promoting effective service-learning impact (Rocha 2000; see also Petkus, 2000). Without a well-designed opportunity for reflection about the service experience, proponents of experiential service learning argue that the primary purpose of service—enhanced student learning of classroom content—may not happen. The National Society for Internships and Experiential Education recommended 10 principles of good practice for service learning, including “structured critical reflection” (Giles, Honnet, & Mogliore, 1991, p. 25). Without structured critical reflection, it is possible that students do not consider their service experience in its larger social and political context, nor determine implications for how to apply the experience to future action.

Experiential service learning is based on Kolb’s (1981, 1984) experiential learning cycle that includes four different phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and, finally active experimentation. Reflection in service learning can be defined as the “intentional consideration of experience in light of particular learning objectives” (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997, p. 153). Eyler (2002) argued that rarely does reflection meet the standard set by Dewey (1933, p. 9) as “persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.” Eyler (2001) proposed a reflection map that includes before, during and after service reflection that can be done alone by the student or with others. The goal is to help students acquire and use complex information and then develop abilities to identify, frame, and resolve ill-structured social problems (Eyler, 2002). Giles and Eyler (1994) stressed the importance of reflection, which
can be both a cognitive process and a structured learning activity. Hatcher and Bringle (1997) provided a set of guidelines for effective reflection: link experience to learning objectives; give guidance for the activities, schedule activities regularly to expand the service experience over the course of the students’ development, allow feedback and assessment; and include clarification of values. Research by Eyler and Giles (1999) on the impact of service learning on students found that when meaningful reflection was incorporated into the service learning, critical thinking performance and reflective judgment increased in comparison to courses with service and little reflection.

Social Justice Service Learning

In general, most approaches to service learning do not make explicit the types of knowledge and values to which students are to be exposed through the service experience (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Given the potential for service learning to actually promote or reinforce paternalistic attitudes and stereotypes, and to provide little social or cultural context for the inequity and deprivation that the students may observe, an approach to service learning has emerged that makes more explicit the values and knowledge base that should be included in a service learning curriculum. Advocates of social justice service learning argue that the service-learning experience should be carefully designed to expose students to the root causes of social problems, structures of injustice and inequity that persist in society, their own privilege and power, and their potential role as agents of social change (Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Pompa, 2002; Robinson, 2000; Rochelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000). Much of the social justice service-learning literature focuses on impacting student moral values and awareness in areas, such as, personal responsibility, cultural competency, civic values, and justice-oriented citizenship (Hess et al., 2007; Rocha, 2000; Saltmarsh, 2005; Schamber & Mahoney, 2008). Social justice service learning draws on Freire’s (1970) conception of a liberating pedagogy through praxis, the integration of theory and the real world. Mayhew and Fernandez provided detailed theoretical grounding for the design of social justice learning experiences that include interactive learning about cultural competency and power dynamics, interrogation of personal assumptions and bias, and opportunities for intergroup contact that builds empathy, mutual respect and understanding.

Critical Service Learning

Although social justice service learning makes a major contribution to the service-learning field with its explicit focus on knowledge and experience regarding social inequity, the outcomes of this approach to service learning
remain primarily focused on students’ learning and development (Mitchell, 2008; Moely, Furco, & Reed, 2008; Moely et al., 2002; Rochelle et al., 2000). Although engagement with community members is an essential component of most service-learning activities, it can often end up being primarily for the purpose of enhancing the student learning process. Rather than adhering to a key service-learning principle of reciprocity, it can be one-sided and exploitative (Butin, 2003; Mintz & Hesser, 1996). Although closely related to social justice service learning, critical service learning deserves separate treatment due to its attention to generating more lasting social change for the community and its members as a part of the service activity.

The vast majority of service-learning activities involve only short-term direct services or assistance: Robinson (2000) reports that a Department of Housing and Urban Development study of 599 service-learning programs found that 92% could be characterized in this way. In general, most service-learning efforts aim for a modest social contribution through the service activity itself and hope that, by building awareness and aptitude for social change among the students, longer-term change can be indirectly generated. Critical service learning explicitly aims for more immediate and substantial impact on the community (Mitchell, 2008; also see Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000, although they do not use the term critical service learning). According to Mitchell (2008), critical service learning can be distinguished from student-focused service learning in three ways: (a) It works to redistribute power among those in service learning; (b) it promotes the development of “authentic relationships” (p. 58); and (c) it works for social change, meaning the actual amelioration of social conditions. Mitchell defined authentic relationships as relationships that, while recognizing differences, emphasize reciprocity and interdependence to identify common goals, shared understanding, and a collaborative approach. Although some social justice learning advocates emphasize the promotion of democratic and civic values among students, critical service-learning advocates stress root cause analysis and more explicit immediate action that challenges the status quo through active engagement in the community served (Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Mitchell, 2008).

Service Learning with Institutional Change

Our review suggests that very few service-learning efforts include an explicit and intentional focus on the potential for service learning to influence, not only the attitudes, behaviors, and future roles of students, but, also, those of instructors, departments and schools, and entire academic institutions. Marullo and Edwards (2000) represented an important exception and provide an explicit vision of a “transformed academy” (p. 896). They focused on the way that institutional structure, operations, and subculture can often promote the very social inequities that service learning aims to help students
confront. For Marullo and Edwards (2000, p. 911), a core function of service learning should be to help transform institutions of higher education into “agents of social transformation.”

There are at least two arguments for a broader quest for institutional impact through service learning. First, with all the investment in building the necessary community partnerships, organizing the service activities, developing a knowledge base about the local context, and designing opportunities for critical reflection, it seems a wasted opportunity to focus only on student learning and development as an outcome. This increased access and exposure to the community provides those teaching the courses, as well as colleagues and administrators in their departments and institutions, with opportunities for learning and personal growth, new avenues for applied research, fresh and relevant approaches to curriculum, and a way to deploy academic interests and resources to address real world problems.

Second, and perhaps even more important, without a focus on the broader institution and its structure, processes, culture, and priorities, it is quite possible that the very learning and values to which the students are exposed through the service activity are undermined by a contrasting set of values exhibited through some of the institution’s structure and practices. Boyle (2007) convincingly argued that the educational context in which the service-learning activity takes place is just as important as the content of activity itself. She outlined three key elements to the educational context: the hidden curriculum or unstated lessons that are learned inside and outside the classroom; the educational atmosphere, culture, or climate; and the social role of the university, namely how good the university is as an institutional neighbor. Boyle argued that academic institutions should not isolate teaching social responsibility and moral and civic values to an activity among students, their instructors, and the community. She suggested that if there is a disparity between class content and the conduct of the university, the service-learning activity could, in fact, cause students to be more cynical about, rather than have a sense of the possibilities for, meaningful social change.

Although some may see an explicit focus on institutional impact as a new dimension to consider for service-learning activities, important insights can be gained from the broader arena of university–community partnerships, which have increasingly focused on the potential for institutional-level change (Gugerty & Swezey, 1996). These larger scale community engagement efforts include a wide range of activities, such as applied research projects, economic development initiatives, and neighborhood revitalization (see, for example, the Department of Housing and Development’s Office of University Partnerships, http://www.oup.org). Although it is certainly possible for university–community partnerships to also be shaped and constrained by longstanding unequal power dynamics, the broader goals and higher profile of these initiatives often heighten attention on ways that the institution
can adjust its own investments and practices to be a better neighbor (Forrant & Silka, 1999; Silka, 2006).

A preeminent example of this institutional change process is the University of Pennsylvania’s West Philadelphia Initiatives (Kermer & Kromer, 2004; Rodin, 2007). Rodin referred to a commentator’s critique of universities as “inequality producing machines” (Brooks, 2005, ¶ 1) and offered the “regenerating effect” of the University of Pennsylvania’s urban revitalization initiative as one example of the impact that such an effort can have on an institution. As the former president who conceived and launched the initiative, she described the institutional change process as follows: “We had to reorient our administrative culture to work holistically toward simultaneously transforming the University and the neighborhood” (Rodin, 2007, p. 46) and, later, “we learned that a university can play a lead role in urban transformation by changing its perspective and making a commitment to alter its ways of interacting and transacting” (Rodin, 2007, p. 118). In terms of service learning, is it possible that these efforts could be more intentionally designed and incorporated into the broader university to help catalyze and promote this type of institutional-level change?

BUILDING TOWARD IMPACT: A SERVICE-LEARNING CASE STUDY

We use the remainder of this article to describe a pilot project that we have implemented at our university that illustrates the evolution in our own conceptualization and implementation of ways to seek more impact through our service-learning efforts. Our goal is to use a specific empirical example to lay out the origins and progress of the effort, not as a best practice model, but as a means for discussing the limitations, challenges, lessons learned, and implications as our service-learning initiative moved from being primarily student-focused toward a more comprehensive approach that includes institutional and community impact.

Institutional and Community Context

Our school is among the oldest schools of social work in the country and, since its founding, has had a commitment to community engagement and action. According to its mission statement, the school “provides and integrates professional social work education, research, and service to promote social justice and empowerment in communities through social work practice locally, nationally, and internationally” (Case Western Reserve University—Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, 2010). The school is a part of a private, research university with a predominant focus on science, medicine, and technology. Bordered by several high-poverty urban neighborhoods on the east side of Cleveland, the university, like so many others
with its prestige, has had a long-standing reputation as being disengaged and elitist. Our social work school has established itself as a much more engaged component of the university due to the field education program that places students in internships at agencies across the region and the applied research of its faculty. Together, these efforts have led to working relationships with civic and nonprofit leaders, as well as community stakeholders. An additional resource at the school that provides an important benefit to the community is a poverty research center that has developed an online neighborhood indicators database, which is widely used by community agencies and public institutions and seeks to “democratize information” (see http://www.neocando.org).

Initial Phase of Service-Learning Implementation

In 2003, our school underwent a strategic planning process that resulted in a commitment to revise the entire masters curriculum to reflect a renewed commitment to skill-based education. Faculty in the macro community development concentration decided to use service learning as an important means of building the desired skills among students. From the outset, community development faculty hoped to build even stronger relationships with surrounding neighborhoods, to support and learn from the work of a rich array of local community-based organizations, and to find ways for the school to increase the scope and depth of its contribution to the broader community.

The new curriculum design called for a macro practice foundation skills course that would be required for all 2-year masters students, whether or not they were in the micro or macro practice concentration. Given the content of the course, the large proportion of the student body who would take it, and the previous experience and comfort of the lead instructor with experiential education, a major objective of the course was to incorporate a service-learning activity. The early effort to reach beyond the classroom was quite basic. Students were given neighborhood tours, and guest speakers from the community were invited to class to talk about the community context. Students completed general assets and needs assessment of a census tract based on data analyzed from the neighborhood indicators database, direct observation of community meetings, and key informant interviews conducted by the students. The assessments were shared with community-based organizations in the target neighborhood. In the first year, each section of the course was assigned one of five census tracts in a nearby neighborhood. In the second year, each section of the course focused on one of five moderate- to high-poverty neighborhoods surrounding the university. The course began with a combined tour of all target neighborhoods and presentations by local stakeholders involved with revitalization projects. Each class section divided into student task groups that were assigned specific
topics, including housing, youth development, commercial development, safety, and senior citizens. The student task groups prepared and presented in class their community assessments based on administrative data analysis, field research in the neighborhoods, and their own reflections on the changes occurring in the community and its impact on the sector they were studying. Building on their community assessment, each student wrote a paper proposing a community organizing strategy. The course concluded with each task group presenting a unifying case project on their assigned topic area with individual advocacy speeches on specific subtopics that applied course concepts to related social problems in a particular neighborhood. However, only a limited number of community partners were provided with the information from the student final projects due to the students’ reluctance to present their proposals more broadly without having had the opportunity to get more community input during proposal development. The most meaningful impact came from one particular student task group that decided to target their advocacy speech to the university itself as an appeal for institutional change, offering a detailed rationale for the school and entire university to form an ongoing partnership with East Cleveland, a municipality that directly borders the university and has the highest rate of poverty in the entire state. In both written and oral course evaluations, students described service learning as a valuable enhancement and aid in understanding course content and macro practice, despite the increased challenges and demands associated with the class assignments.

Moving Toward Broader Service-Learning Impact

Several factors led to a strategic effort in the third year of the project to move beyond student-focused service learning and seek a greater impact on neighboring communities and the university itself. The presentation by the student task group highlighted the obvious potential and, indeed, obligation for the social work school to be more intentional and ambitious in its relationship with the neighboring high-poverty communities. Faculty in the macro community development program felt that the experience needed to be extended from the first-year coursework into the second-year advanced curriculum to deepen student learning and increase the potential benefit to the community. Faculty were also dissatisfied with the ad-hoc community connections that had been established in the first 2 years and were increasingly wary of potentially exploitative relationships in which students gained from the experience, but the community did not. Finally, there was institutional support at the school for finding ways for the school, itself, to be a greater agent of social change, given the troubling trends of increasing deprivation in the communities around it.

We decided to commit the next several years to work in the most disadvantaged neighboring community of East Cleveland, a municipality of less
than 25,000 people. The objective of the enhanced service-learning project was the development of authentic relationships, as defined by Mitchell (2008), with key community stakeholders framed by an explicit goal of developing a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship between the school and the community. Building on preexisting connections, faculty members began a series of conversations with elected officials and institutional leaders in the community. Based on these conversations, two primary partners for the next phase of the project were identified. The local public library was widely recognized as a valuable community asset and focal point of community activity due to its energetic leader, its renovated and well-located facility, and its well-used services. A regional faith-based community organizing group, the Northeast Ohio Alliance for Hope, had decided to target the same community and had begun to mobilize community residents and identify revitalization strategies.

To kick off the targeted focus on the partner community, the mayor was invited to speak to the entire school community, including, not just students in the course, but all students, faculty members, and staff members.

The session was lively and well-attended, and it led to a series of follow-up meetings with the mayor and his staff and, ultimately, to the city government becoming a third key partner in the school–community working relationship. As a result of continued faculty outreach, relationships were cultivated with members of city council, the schools superintendent, the chief of police, and the fire chief, all of whom were involved in guest lectures at the school, as well as in service-learning project work out in the community.

These community partners helped shape the service-learning focus of the macro practice skills foundation class. Given how the community had been ravaged by predatory lending, foreclosures, and depopulation, there was a strong request that vacant and abandoned property become a focus. The city had been invited by the Ohio Department of Development to prepare a proposal for Neighborhood Stabilization Program funds, a federally funded program to address the impacts of housing foreclosures. However, the city did not have reliable, current information available on vacant properties with which to develop the proposal. The partners agreed that students in the course would pair up with community residents to conduct a vacant housing and property survey of all streets in the community. The research center at the school provided in-kind support, conducting initial geographic and administrative data analyses and working with students to create maps of their assessments. Over a series of afternoons and weekends, students walked or drove the blocks of the community paired with residents from the community organizing partner and rated each house and vacant lot.

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1 The connection to the mayor was actually initiated by a doctoral student Diwakar Vadapalli, who was an instructor for the macro practice skills course and, inspired by the push for a deeper relationship with the community, suggested to the faculty that the mayor be invited to speak at the school.
The fire chief, concerned about the fire hazard caused by vacant unsecured structures, initiated contact with the faculty and assigned firefighters to accompany students. Course assignments consisted of the community assessment, a community organizing paper, an advocacy speech, and a series of reflection and evaluation logs. In addition to assessing the general issue of vacant and abandoned property, students also studied the impact of vacant property on one of four topics: education, safety, senior citizens, and employment. Besides the visual property assessment, students conducted interviews with key community informants and attended relevant community meetings.

We intended to strengthen the impact of the service-learning experience in multiple ways. The project was expanded beyond the first-year macro skills practice course to also include all five advanced courses taken by students who choose to concentrate in community and social development in the second year of the social work graduate degree program. The courses cover topics such as the concepts and history of community development, community organizing and other social change models, strategic planning and program implementation, research and analytical tools, and developing and managing resources for community development. Four community organizations were identified as partners for the advanced courses. Besides the public library and community organizing group that worked with the first-year course, a local social service center and a local health center were added. Instructors in all five courses were asked to incorporate a focus on the targeted community into their class syllabus and given support to design service-learning assignments that would attempt to generate a product useful to the community partner organizations. Service-learning activities included door-knocking to engage residents from streets near an elementary school in forming a parent patrol before and after school, interviews and focus groups of parents and teachers at a local elementary school, community needs and resource assessments with GIS-mapped data, and program designs, grant proposals, and business plans based on the needs and resource assessments. Students made formal presentations of their initial community needs and resource analyses to the community partner organizations and then held a series of informal meetings with the partners to discuss and develop program design proposals. Final documents were made available electronically to the partner organizations for their modification and use.

A final enhancement to the service-learning activity was a major culminating event held at the end of the school year at the public library. Attended by over 75 people, including the mayor, other elected officials, community partner organizations, community residents, students, faculty, the dean of the social work school, and the university provost, the event was an important opportunity to reflect on the learning and achievements of the year and celebrate the successful first phase of a commitment to a sustained partnership between the social work school and the community. Those in attendance...
reviewed posters with data analysis and recommendations created by students in the macro practice skills foundation course. Certificates of appreciation were presented to the key community partners. The achievements in the third year of the effort led the dean, provost, and university administration to see the potential for a greater role for the university in this community.

Emerging Benefits of the Evolving Project

To assess the outcomes of the project, additional means of assessing results were developed beyond the usual course evaluations, including in-class reflection sessions, a student advisory committee, and student focus groups (a portion of which was held without faculty present to encourage more open feedback). However, a key limitation of the project, thus far, is the absence of more rigorous means of measuring student learning, satisfaction, and outcomes, as well as the lack of any means of documenting and measuring impact on the university or on the community.

Student impact. Students have communicated their sense of benefit from the project both directly through various forms of feedback but, also, through their overall engagement in the service-learning activities. Many students went beyond the required assignments to conduct additional interviews or attend additional meetings, as well as some students arranging to volunteer in the community to continue their engagement. Some of the first-year students have switched their concentration to community development to pursue a career in more macro-level social change work. Although students affirmed the benefits of the learning experience in their course evaluations and were excited to feel that they were making an actual difference in the community, they also reported that the course workload was too high, assignments were not always clear, and that the community engagement had greatly increased demands on their schedules.

University impact. Although launched as a project within the school of social work, the partnership appears to benefit the entire university in numerous ways. Course instructors have appreciated the grounded opportunities for teaching course concepts and skills. The school and university benefitted from the positive press coverage through both television and newspaper coverage of the vacant property survey effort and end-of-year celebration. The dean of the school made presentations about the service-learning project to the school’s Visiting Committee and the university Board of Trustees. A member of the community development faculty was asked to consult with the medical school in revising and enhancing a community assessment project required of all first-year medical students. The experience of the service-learning project has informed the design of an interdisciplinary strategic alliance on social justice launched by the provost.
as part of the universitywide strategic planning effort. Recent funding for the Social Justice Alliance includes a debut collaborative action research project in East Cleveland that will involve multiple departments and schools at the university.

Community impact. In addition to the benefiting from the community assessment, strategic program design, and proposal-writing work, community agencies and organizations benefited in many other ways from the most recent year of the project. The vacant housing and property survey required over a thousand student-hours of service, and the data was used by the city to complete the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP) application to the state development department. The city was ultimately approved for over two million dollars in NSP funds (the research center at the school was a key partner in this effort, providing in-kind technical assistance and strategic consulting to city staff). The service learning served as a catalyst for the greater engagement of community residents and stakeholders in decision-making with city government and other community-based organizations, including: the city held two stakeholder forums to engage the community in the NSP planning process; the community organizing partner broadened its participant base; and the social service center received recommendations about building a more engaged, community-based board of directors. In total, students developed and shared over 75 project ideas for city and other community stakeholders’ consideration and refinement.

LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS

Our efforts to push toward greater impact from service learning have generated a range of important lessons and implications for strengthening our next phase of design and implementation (see also Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Fogel & Cook, 2006 for excellent delineation of lessons learned from their efforts to implement university-community partnerships). These include:

- Structured critical reflection requires more time and engagement. To be effective and meaningful, structured critical reflection must be allotted ample time in the course syllabus and arrangements should be made for community engagement in the process.
- The development of authentic relationships requires a multiyear commitment. In addition to overcoming the distrust and skepticism among community stakeholders generated by past university disengagement, considerable time and relationship-building will be required for honest dialogue to be possible about the opportunities and shortcomings on both sides. This dialogue should be framed within a context of historical and current structural disparities.
• Well-placed champions are key to institutional impact. A schoolwide impact was achieved through faculty and student leadership, the participation of an entire class cohort of students, and the support of the dean. Broadening the impact to the university will require effective alignment with existing efforts, such as the interdisciplinary strategic alliances and community partnerships and service-learning efforts in other schools.

• Management and administrative support is critical. As the effort continues to expand in scale and complexity, it will be essential to develop a management infrastructure that can support faculty in the tasks of coordination, communication, and external relations.

• Alignment and collaboration with existing university efforts also dedicated to outreach and partnerships with local communities. A strategic effort should be made to build and leverage working relationships with university resources that are also dedicated to bridging university resources with community opportunities, such as, field education programs and centers for community outreach and partnerships.

• Documentation and assessment. A serious commitment to working toward sustained impact will require a clearly articulated set of objectives, well-designed measures to assess progress toward those objectives, and a documentation strategy that can capture project implementation and modification over time. Compelling evidence about outcomes at all three levels of impact is needed to help demonstrate the value of seeking greater impact through service learning.

• Student workload. It is important to anticipate and make adjustments for the increased demands on students, including how to better align the new service-learning initiative with their field education requirement, which already requires a 2- to 3-day weekly commitment from students.

• Faculty workload and incentives. Currently, lead faculty responsible for the service-learning effort consider the opportunity to craft and learn from the project a high enough priority that they are willing to make the substantial commitment of extra time that is necessary to mount the effort. However, this situation is not sustainable. Part of the solution is for faculty to find creative ways to align their research, grant support and publications with this service-learning effort. If this work is truly of value to the school and university, workload reduction, administrative support, and recognition of this work as a part of promotion and tenure consideration are essential. These complementary benefits and recognition will also be vital to attract the involvement of increasing numbers of other faculty at and beyond the school.

• Demands on community stakeholders. Although the increased commitment to generating meaningful benefits to the community is welcomed by community stakeholders, it will be important to moderate the demands on community partners, as well as to find ways to formally recognize and incentivize their contributions, e.g., co-instructor appointments. Strong
coordination is necessary among faculty and students to avoid multiple requests on community stakeholders’ time. Furthermore, identifying designated community liaisons and points of access at the university will make it much easier for community actors to navigate the multifaceted university context.

- Academic timelines and curriculum requirements. Real limits exist to the alignment between the role and functioning of the academy and the workings of the real world. Extending the service-learning effort from a single-course activity to an entire year and, indeed, across multiple academic years, helps to some degree with the artificial constraints of the academic calendar. However, the reality is that curriculum design and timing will be largely driven by academic functions such as required subject matter, student assignments, and grading, rather than the requirements of the social change efforts. Clear proactive communication with community partners about these constraints and a willingness and ability to reconsider academic conventions where possible is key.

- Complementing student resources with expert resources. For all their energy and willingness to learn, students are ultimately in training mode and, thus, of limited utility to real world efforts to promote change. Students’ time and effort should be complemented as much as possible with that of faculty members, research staff, and other strategic partners with relevant expertise.

CONCLUSION: MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF SERVICE LEARNING

Our review of the literature and early experiences with a service-learning community partnership at our own institution lead us to propose that service learning should seek to promote social change through authentic relationships and impacts at three levels: the student, the academic institution, and the community. This requires integrating service activities with structured critical reflection, social justice learning, and broader efforts designed to promote social change (see Figure 1 and Table 2).

A Transformative Educational Experience for Students

Maximizing impact on students requires service activities in a specific community to be closely integrated to course readings and in-class work. There should be well-designed activities for reflection on the experience, including individual reflection, group discussion, and intergroup discussion that ideally includes community members. Service activities should be designed, not just for modest, one-time contributions of assistance, but for more sustained and impactful change.
Figure 1 Maximizing service-learning impact.

Table 2 Maximizing Service-Learning Impact

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of impact</th>
<th>Key elements of service-learning</th>
<th>Priority outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>• Integration of community service with course readings and assignments</td>
<td>• Greater retention of curriculum content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Opportunities for skill building, experimentation, and application of learning</td>
<td>• Ability to apply academic learning to real world situations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Theory and practice integrated with service through dialogue and critical thinking exercises</td>
<td>• Increased skills (e.g., problem solving, cultural competence)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Structured personal and group reflection on out-of-classroom experience</td>
<td>• Deepen student moral and civic values</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Discussion of the history and context of societal disparities</td>
<td>• Increased student commitment to promoting social justice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Intergroup dialog with community members as students understand other cultures and worldviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Examination of personal assumptions, biases, values, and goals</td>
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(Continued)
TABLE 2 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of impact</th>
<th>Key elements of service-learning</th>
<th>Priority outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| University      | - Institutional commitment to mutually-beneficial partnerships with community stakeholders  
                  - Institutional efforts to cultivate “authentic relationships” (Mitchell, 2008) with community partners based on respect for difference, reciprocity, and interdependence  
                  - Institutionwide activities that promote better awareness and understanding of neighboring communities and their contexts  
                  - Examination of, and willingness to change, institutional culture, structures, and practices  
                  - Comprehensive, long-term focus on one or more target communities | - Institutionwide reorientation toward more equitable and mutually beneficial relationships between the university and community  
                  - Specific changes in institutional priorities and operations related to community engagement, faculty and student incentives for community service, and investments with direct community benefit  
                  - Resource development that can serve interests of both the university and the community |
| Community       | - Service that engages community members as partners in design, implementation, and assessment  
                  - Explicit focus on goals and benefits for community  
                  - Acknowledgement of historic and systemic context of inequality  
                  - Capacity building of community partners  
                  - Sharing of information, resources and power  
                  - Service activity with measurable benefits to the community | - Increased capacity, knowledge, and networks among community stakeholders and residents  
                  - Increased access and input to university decision-making processes  
                  - Increased community capacity to manage and sustain investments in revitalization  
                  - Improved quality of life for community residents |

An Institutional Commitment to Cultivating Trusting Relationships and Mutually-Beneficial Partnerships With the Community

Maximizing the impact on the university entails identifying the ways in which the institution’s culture and practices may run counter to the values and aspirations of the service-learning effort and, then, taking intentional steps to address and reorient these practices. Attention should be given to increased cultural competency with opportunities for students, instructors, and community members to explore their own biases and assumptions. The institution should identify ways in which it can serve as a better neighbor by establishing areas of contact and exchange beyond the academic department or school where the service-learning activity is initially generated. A multiyear and sustained focus on a particular community would be optimal, to provide more opportunity to deepen and apply knowledge about
the specific community context and to develop authentic relationships with community stakeholders.

A Community Committed to Partnership With the Academic Institution to Assess, Design, and Implement Changes That Promote Social Justice, Equity, and Civic Responsibility

Maximizing the impact on the local community requires engagement of community members, not merely as recipients of the service, but as partners in the design, implementation, and assessment of the activity. Partnership involves the sharing of information, resources, and decision-making. Especially important is an explicit agreement to focus on issues of social justice, including a willingness to acknowledge and discuss the historical and systemic context of inequity.

In conclusion, service learning is a compelling umbrella concept that will continue to include a broad range of educational activities beyond the classroom, with most efforts taking the form of modest charitable projects, but some efforts establishing longer-term sustained partnerships with communities that aim to generate broader-scale change. For institutions of higher education seeking to maximize the benefits of this pedagogical approach, we propose a more explicit focus on impacting students, communities, and the university. Our own early efforts at service learning have revealed numerous challenges associated with this approach and highlighted considerable room for improvement. However, it has also demonstrated the potential to relatively quickly position an effort to make promising advances internal and external to the university. Just 3 years into our effort, we believe that a strong foundation has been laid at our school, at the university, and with key stakeholders in our target community to undertake a more rigorous test of a service-learning effort that could work toward lasting change locally and contribute to the national dialogue about service learning.

REFERENCES


