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# Assessing University-Community Outreach

*In order to improve the quality of university-community partnerships, institutions of higher education are encouraged to assess both process and outcomes. This article suggests multiple approaches for assessment, a collaborative model involving the various constituents, and ongoing institutional support to sustain the assessment efforts. This includes integration of assessment of university-community partnerships with faculty members' scholarly agendas.*

In the best of all urban university worlds, outreach is less about reaching out than it is about blurring the boundaries between the university and the community. Such blurring occurs through engaging the university and the community in defining mutual concerns and together exploring ways to address them. Such deliberately joint action centers on two primary purposes: student learning and strengthening the metropolitan community. A related purpose is to further inform faculty scholarship and teaching.

In the best of all partnership worlds, both the community and the university will be concerned about assessing the outcomes of their mutual undertaking. But whether or not this interest in assessment is jointly held, universities must increasingly and systematically account for the effects of their teaching, research, and community-based activities on students, faculty, and those communities. State boards of higher education, legislators, and grantors all want evidence of the nature and quality of the institution's achievements. Indicators of success are often also the means by which potential students and parents determine an institution's quality.

The most important benefits of assessment do not come from motivations such as accountability and competition for enrollment. Just as community citizens and leaders want a constantly improving quality of life, so too do faculty members and other university leaders want to preserve and improve the best of experiences for students. Faculty members who are involved with their community and administrators who support such involvement want to know the ways in which their investment with community partners is yielding significant

returns for students, for the community and for the university. At its best, assessment will provide some information on those returns.

## Organizational Context

Ideally, university activities and their assessment are driven by the university mission. At Portland State University, the mission includes a commitment to "enhance the intellectual, social, cultural and economic qualities of urban life," and to conduct research and community service "that support a high quality educational environment and reflect issues important to the region." This sets a broad context within which to plan for and assess community engagement. More specifically, two of the four major goals of University Studies, the university's nationally recognized four-year general education program, find expression in community engagement and provide a focus for assessment. One goal centers on enhancing awareness and appreciation of societal diversity in the local, national, and global communities, while the other focuses on ethical issues and social responsibility. Both goals speak to the significance of sampling community and organizational realities as part of the student experience. The boundaries between the university and the community are increasingly blurred with community-based learning experiences. A required final course in the University Studies sequence, a senior capstone seminar in which interdisciplinary teams of students complete a community-based project over two quarters, along with other community-based learning courses is a prime example. Furthermore, the inclusion of these community-related goals reveals a basic premise for an urban university: there is a reciprocal value in engagement. The purpose of assessment is to test that premise and characterize the nature of the value.

To support faculty in this major curricular reform, Portland State University established the Center for Academic Excellence to address three related strands of activity—community/university partnerships, teaching and learning excellence, and assessment. The center became the organizational structure for coordination of the institutional focus of the curricular community/university partnership and for much of the assessment of these partnerships.

## Assessment Efforts

In beginning to cultivate an environment for assessment at Portland State University, members of the faculty were selected to serve on a team charged with establishing an overall assessment framework. The principles set forth by the team highlighted the centrality of student learning in all assessment efforts, and emphasized the importance of "a faculty-centered culture of assessment." The first approaches to assessing community/university engagement were motivated in particular by a Learn and Serve grant from the Corporation for National Service, with additional support from an anonymous donor. In the Learn and Serve grant, PSU proposed the development and implementation of over 100 community-based courses and the infrastructure to achieve at least a one-time participation by every student in a course that had a direct connection with the community. This ambitious objective meant that over 2,000 students and

hundreds of community organizations would ultimately be affected by service learning activities. In this context it became imperative to document the impact this service had on the community, the students, the faculty, and the institution itself.

These various motivations, changes, and grants led to the examination of the outcomes of both the community-based learning courses and the general education senior capstones. In addition to the focus on student learning that a curriculum-based approach implies, our role as an urban university led us also to consider the impact of these activities on our multiple constituencies, including the community. Moreover, including the impact on the community together with achieving academic learning objectives is consistent with the intention in service learning to address "community needs and...a broader set of social issues" (Gelmon, et al., 1998).

Using funds from the anonymous donor, the university allocated minigrants to individuals and groups of faculty who were challenged to form partnerships that would result in capstone courses. To determine the effects on broader social issues, we wanted to catalogue the kinds of partners, nature and location of the projects, kinds of students involved (e.g., class standing, major), and anticipated outcomes of the projects for the community, for faculty, and the students' learning. We also wanted an evaluation of the quality of the project by each of these constituent groups. We sought data consistent enough to be aggregated and to allow us to "sum" what differences we were making, and how we were making them. With input from faculty, our very first attempt resulted in a form distributed to capstone faculty for pre and post-capstone assessments. However, when asked to complete the forms, faculty members were resistant, claiming that the assessment of their project results along a common set of dimensions did not fairly represent the complexity and idiosyncrasy of their capstones. It was clear that there were difficulties in collecting this kind of data systematically.

At the same time we were attempting to collect common data, we also encouraged faculty to design their own assessment activities and imbed these activities in their courses. The benefits of this approach were its flexibility and encouragement of creativity. Some faculty members used journals as a primary way to assess their courses; others used the final products created by the class as a benchmark of success. Many utilized written or oral evaluations from both students and community participants. A significant outcome of this effort was a marked increase in the level of faculty support: faculty demonstrated great enthusiasm for participation in the development of partnerships, the teaching of the courses, and their own design of an assessment process. Supporting faculty-defined assessment helped introduce the idea of assessment as scholarship that would not only inform pedagogy, but also become a means of documenting faculty service for purposes of promotion and tenure (Driscoll and Lynton, 1999). However, the approach worked counter to the university's desire to aggregate data in ways that would capture the overall impact of service activities, because no two members of the faculty appeared to gather data in similar ways. In the end, the emphasis on student learning as defined and assessed by individual members of the faculty became the guiding principle. Aggregated research results became secondary.

As we were learning about the challenges of collecting systematic data, a research group (Driscoll, et al., 1996) associated with the Learn and Serve grant was examining

how to assess the impact of service learning on multiple constituencies. Requiring the participation of four seemingly distinct stakeholders—the community, the students, the faculty, and the institution—made the assessment process appear both formidable and complex. Nonetheless, the Director of Community University Partnerships gathered together a small team of faculty, administrators, and graduate students to design a case study of service-learning courses with multiple purposes. The first was to engage faculty and administrators from across the campus in the practice of assessing service learning and integrating it with their own scholarship. The second was to develop a set of measurable outcomes associated with service learning. The third was to document the impact of these experiences on the various constituents, as required by the federal grant. Finally, combined with the parallel work of the assessment team, the information gathered would be used to improve the courses and partnerships at the university.

The case study team researched ten courses in depth, using quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the impact on community members, students, faculty, and the institution. The community partners were an essential element in this process. Community advisory board members gave continuous feedback about the process and content of the study. Others participated in focus groups delineating the community variables most affected by students' involvement in the community. Student impact was measured through conducting classroom observations, community site observations, focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys. Course syllabi were analyzed to see how well the service experience was documented and integrated into the other learning activities in the course. Interviews were also conducted with faculty and administrators to register the broader impact of community partnerships across the university.

The case study process provided many insights. The most powerful resulted from the interviews and focus groups, where we learned how much institutional support faculty and students required in order to be successful in the community. Students requested more preservice preparation to learn better time management skills, greater understanding of the diverse neighborhoods they were working in, and strategies for effective group collaboration. We now have an academic professional with skills in teaching and learning strategies who is able to help faculty and students become better prepared to engage with the community in meaningful ways, and thus to learn from these experiences.

The case study findings also suggested further directions for professional development that would enrich faculty teaching. Faculty needed support in developing reflective practices in their classrooms, help with the logistics of managing a community-based experience, and assistance in connecting their community-based teaching with scholarship opportunities in their academic areas. As a result, over a dozen faculty workshops, retreats, and seminars were added each year to enhance faculty teaching.

Furthermore, the case study project enhanced both our relationship with, and understanding of, the community. The data demonstrated that we exceeded the expectations of our community partners and met genuine community identified needs. In addition, the logistical barriers that had hindered successful partnership development were identified and solutions emerged.

## Institutionalizing Assessment

In addition to informing us about the impact of service learning, the case study also taught us a great deal about the process of institutionalizing the assessment of community/university partnerships. First, we learned that the qualitative research gave us rich descriptive information about the lived experience of those participating in the community-based learning courses. However, it was clearly the most time consuming, cumbersome, and expensive element of the study. As a result, we simplified our process by creating a standardized focus group protocol that we now use with a sample of our students and community partners. Second, we were able to create a standardized community and student survey from the information we distilled from the qualitative research. With this process, we also have a way to gather uniform data from our community partners.

One administrative unit that made this institutionalization of assessment possible is the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP). In addition to providing support for administering, analyzing, and supporting data, this office has become involved in several national initiatives that encourage the gathering of such data. These initiatives have included the Urban Universities Statistical Portrait Project, the Urban Universities Portfolio Project, and Restructuring for Urban Student Success. Most recently OIRP introduced an Undergraduate Student Survey, which asks students about their community involvement and volunteer activities. In addition, OIRP tracks the number of students who participate in community-based learning courses. Furthermore, a telephone survey of 5-year-out degree recipients asks these former students to identify experiences during their college education that offered them the opportunity to apply to "real world" settings what they learned academically. These data are disseminated to departments and administrators, and are posted on the Web. OIRP wants to link these data collaboratively with the data gathered from the individual courses to create a comprehensive picture of the impact that service learning has on students.

The assessment processes associated with the community-based learning programs at Portland State University have changed and developed over time. We are now struggling with the issues of how to integrate centralized and decentralized efforts on our campus; sustain faculty and institutional efforts in ways that account for our activities; and improve the quality of our teaching, learning, service, and respect the multiple constituencies.

## Assessing Faculty Work in Outreach

Documenting and assessing outreach also has a direct relationship with faculty scholarship. We continue to support the research and scholarship of our faculty, especially as it affects to assessment of the impact that service learning has on our community and students. Specific minigrants are awarded to faculty to study the effects their courses have on the community and the learning of their students. Faculty members are encouraged to build on this as a core dimension of their scholarship.

The national conversation precipitated by Ernest Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) has expanded forms of scholarship and resulted in new practices for faculty documentation of their community-related work. In particular, Ernest Lynton's

*Making the Case for Professional Service* (1995) addressed the outreach aspect of faculty work and built a case for its scholarship, which has also expanded definitions of scholarship and practices of documentation.

This national dialogue acknowledging broader definitions of scholarship is congruent with the priorities of many institutions. In particular, urban institutions seeking to align their own future to the future of their communities have a natural affinity for the scholarship of outreach. Imbedding these forms of scholarship in promotion and tenure guidelines encourages recognition of the public service dimension of faculty and indicates the willingness of institutions to regard these scholarly dimensions at the level of policy. However, while changing institutional priorities are expressed in new promotion and tenure policies, translating these policies into practice is another matter. *Making Outreach Visible* (Driscoll and Lynton, 1999) is a source of guidance for that translation.

A project based on Lynton and Driscoll's work brought together four institutions (Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, Michigan State University, Portland State University, and the University of Memphis) that have an institutional commitment to the scholarship of outreach. Evidence of that commitment was based on tenure and promotion guidelines, senior administrative support, and resource allocation. The four institutions dedicated their efforts to developing a model of documentation and a framework for addressing the scholarship of outreach that both paralleled traditional scholarship and provided ways of capturing the continually developing nature of outreach.

The model acknowledges three key components of the scholarship of outreach: purpose, process, and outcomes. These components are continuously modified through reflection and feedback from community partners. In fact, the scholarship itself is characterized by continuous dialogue and modification, prompting participants to categorize scholarship of outreach as interested research versus traditional disinterested research.

The first component—purpose—includes description, diagnosis, and results from multiple influences: stakeholder priorities, resources, expertise and experience, situation-specific aspects, individual development, and scholarly inquiry. Just as the interaction with community partners shapes the whole project, so does the interaction of all these elements shape the purpose component. Clearly the community plays a crucial role in differentiating the scholarship of outreach from more traditional forms of scholarship. Community partners help frame outreach, provide resources, and collaborate on project design, and often bring experiences and skill to the table that would not otherwise be present. The relationship between the faculty and their community partners requires constant evaluation and adjustment. As a result of their participation in this partnership community, members can build capacity, network with other community institutions, and better navigate unforeseen impacts, both positive and negative. Capturing the nuance of this very fluid work is the challenge.

The next key component—process—includes design and delivery of the outreach effort. It, too, is comprised of numerous factors. Several of these relate directly to factors Boyer identified in his work, e.g., appropriate methods and continuous reflection. To these recognized factors the working group added two more that respond to the interested nature of the scholarship—ongoing adaptation and attainable goals.

It is in the last of the three key components—outcomes—that scholarly outreach is further distinguished from traditional scholarship. In addition to traditional scholarly, peer-reviewed journals and presentations at disciplinary conferences, there are other quite different venues for disseminating the results of outreach. For example, the presentation of results will often extend beyond the academic arena into the community itself. Documentation of scholarship should include these presentations, as well as records of the ways these efforts have influenced programs or policy.

In this new scholarship model of outreach, outcomes are categorized as benefiting five different constituencies: the external partner, the faculty member, students, the institution, and the discipline or profession. Not every project will necessarily benefit all constituencies, but the model suggests some of the values for each constituency. In the case of the external partner, outcomes might meet immediate needs, enhance long-term capability, create resources, or contribute to the sustainability of the partner's efforts. Outcomes related to the faculty member could include enhanced capability in providing professional service, enrichment of teaching (which will certainly also affect students), and new research ideas. Benefits to students are enhanced learning opportunities, community involvement, career connections, and personal development. Institutions may benefit from contributions to their missions and priorities, strengthened external ties, and enhanced image in the community. In the more traditional realm of the discipline or profession, benefits may be additions to the knowledge base, improved methodology, and new forms and venues for effective dissemination.

There are questions raised by this form of scholarship. Some revolve around balancing the effort of documenting the work against the results of the documentation. If engaging in outreach can produce traditional forms of scholarship, e.g., a peer-reviewed article, is it worth the effort to further document the scholarship unique to the outreach effort itself? This less traditional form of scholarship may appear either costly or simply unproductive for faculty. Lynton and Driscoll's work moves us towards changing the academic culture by providing models that can be used as test cases; practice review sessions can center around these cases as institutions come to grips with this new form of scholarship.

Portland State University has largely embraced this new attitude and instituted tenure and promotion guidelines that endorsed the more contemporary and proactive picture of faculty work. The guidelines recognize both the scholarship of teaching and the scholarship of outreach. As an institution, Portland State has seen several successful cases of promotion and tenure built at least partially on the scholarship of outreach. At the departmental level there is still resistance to reviewing community learning scholarship materials for promotion that may look quite different from traditional standards. Such materials require reviewers to move outside of their disciplinary comfort area when they are challenged to apply familiar standards of review to unfamiliar forms. They are also asked to look at the dissemination of this scholarship outside the traditional channels of peer review. One institutional barrier to sustaining this new scholarship at Portland State is the absence of a university-wide promotion and tenure committee. Thus, there is no central structural element that can work as a focal point in familiarizing faculty with the new model and arguing for its relevance.

The assessment of faculty work, including work with the community, is a critical dimension of the assessment of outreach. Without a clear picture of how their individual efforts will be viewed and rewarded, it will be difficult to gain and sustain faculty commitment to community engagement. In order to support the scholarship of outreach the university must develop a culture that not only reflects institutional goals but also extends to community outreach the respect traditionally granted other forms of scholarship.

## Lessons Learned—Principles for the Future

As we take stock of our efforts to date and plan for the future, there are lessons we can share. The principles inherent in creating a culture that support the scholarship of outreach also extend to supporting all assessment of community/university partnerships. If assessment itself can be framed as a scholarly activity, then assessment of community/university partnerships will have the most fundamental legitimacy possible in academia. Ideally, as the new culture evolves, an institution will also provide very practical support that assists faculty in implementing assessment activities. In community/university partnerships, which go beyond the classroom, inclusion of the community perspective is crucial, requiring a larger view and possibly very different assessment practices. Providing faculty development activities that provoke ideas about the relationship of assessment to student learning through community connections, present assessment models, and focus on developing methodology for assessment are other dimensions of creating a supportive culture.

There must be value in assessment for all the constituencies involved. As we learned, an institutional need to have data that can be aggregated is not necessarily a good match for the faculty member who is looking at improving his or her course or increasing student learning. In fact, the most desirable motivation is a faculty member's realization of benefits that come from a well-constructed approach to assessment—that goes beyond traditional classroom grading. It is faculty commitment to an increased understanding of student learning that ultimately provides the yeast for a culture supportive of assessment.

There must also be latitude for multiple approaches to assessing community/university connections. However, while there is an enormous challenge in capturing the results that come from multiple approaches, there is an even greater challenge in making the results as public as the space in which the community/university partnerships occur. So, while the principle of continuous improvement is at work, the university still has little formal evidence of the ways in which all of its partnerships are making a cumulative and collective difference in broad community issues.

When an institution focuses on creating a culture that supports assessment of community/university partnerships, there is a hidden benefit. In focusing attention on this kind of activity, the university is saying, "We value this activity. We believe it is worth assessing." Even though faculty often resist assessment and see it as some possible test of their work or infringement on the academic freedom of their classroom, assessment efforts over time can communicate to faculty both the importance of assessment and the potential it has for featuring the accomplishments of faculty work. Furthermore,

focusing on assessment sends a positive message to students and community partners that says, "This must be really important work if you are observing our partnership and wanting to talk with me."

Assessing community/university partnerships will be more effective if that assessment is imbedded in a culture that expects assessment on all fronts. At Portland State University, the original assessment team has now become an Assessment Council, with representation from all academic units as well as the Faculty Senate. There are many activities in process that indicate a greater attention to what former PSU President Judith Ramaley promoted as a "culture of evidence." These include a campus roundtable discussion on assessment, a campus-wide symposium on the subject, and the appointment of a vice-provost and special assistant to the president charged with championing assessment as one of three major initiatives for the campus. This broader emphasis creates an important supportive context for the assessment of community/university partnerships as we strive to achieve the best of urban university worlds.

### *Suggested Readings*

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