How Do We Know That Our Work Makes A Difference?

Assessment Strategies for Service Learning and Civic Engagement

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Abstract

Institutions committed to civic engagement and service learning must be able to demonstrate the impact of initiatives. Understanding and articulating "impact" requires knowledge and expertise in the use of various assessment methods, in order to design the measurement of impact, analyze the findings, and report the results. This article provides an overview of practical methods and tools for assessment planning and implementation, and offers suggestions for readers to design assessment plans for their own programs.

Context for Assessment

Increasingly a shift is being observed in higher education from an "old way" emphasizing teaching to a "new way" emphasizing learning. Barr and Tagg (1995) described this as moving from a conceptualization of a college as a place that exists to provide instruction to thinking of a college as an institution that exists to produce learning. If one thinks of the core issues of teaching and learning—such as knowledge, focus, curriculum definition, instruction, design, student role, and organizational change—a framework can be created to illustrate the transition from an old to a new way, as shown in Table 1 (Holland et al., 1996). Most of the issues show movement from the "old" to the "new" ways—not to deny any of the good characteristics of the old way, or to suggest that they all must be eliminated, but rather to emphasize the "new" ways of thinking about higher education that represent this shift from teaching to learning. Service learning and other forms of community-based education all demonstrate characteristics of the new ways, emphasizing application of knowledge, team and community focus for learning, collective instruction and curriculum definition, integrated sequencing of courses, and active learning by students. All of these characteristics are important to take into consideration as one contemplates assessing the impact of such programs.

Table 1: Moving from Teaching to Learning

"OLD WAY"		*ISSUE*		*"NEW WAY"*
Acquisition	⋯⋯➤	Knowledge	⋯⋯➤	Application
Individual	⋯⋯➤	Focus	⋯⋯➤	Team/Community,
By faculty	⋯⋯➤	Curriculum definition	⋯⋯➤	By faculty, community, students
Banking	⋯⋯➤	Instruction	⋯⋯➤	Collective
Prescribed courses	⋯⋯➤	Design	⋯⋯➤	Integrated sequence
Passive	⋯⋯➤	Student learning	⋯⋯➤	Active
Sporadic reform	⋯⋯➤	Change	⋯⋯➤	Continuous improvement

Service Learning and the Engaged Campus

As institutions speak about the concept of the "engaged campus," others want to be able to know what engagement is and whether this is a true descriptor of their own institution. What does an engaged campus look like? What is different about faculty? What are the characteristics of the students? What can be observed about community-campus partnerships? All of these are questions that can begin to frame a campus-based assessment of engagement.

One method that is suggested for increasing civic engagement is the use of service learning as an instructional strategy. The published literature on assessing the impact of service learning across a broad range of constituencies is not very extensive; much of the literature has focused on the impact on students as individuals and on student learning. Therefore, many campuses find it difficult to articulate how a service-learning program can be assessed, let alone how the results of such an assessment contributes to a local understanding of civic engagement.

The "engaged campus" is being discussed frequently in higher education forums, and one of the key areas that emerges as vital for any assessment is an analysis of community-university partnerships (Holland and Gelmon, 1998). The 1999 report of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities, "The Engaged Institution," offers a set of characteristics that form a seven-part test of engagement (Kellogg Commission, 1999). Similarly, the 1999 "Presidents' Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education" (Campus Compact, 1999) includes a draft of a "Campus Assessment of Civic Responsibility" that provides the basis for institutions to conduct a baseline assessment of civic engagement through a deliberative self-assessment process.

Why Do Assessments?

Why do we do assessments? The primary reason is often to provide immediate feedback, which enables program leaders to make incremental changes during the program, responding to needs and concerns. Over 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, as evidence of the value received for the money invested in a program through a grant. Almost all accrediting agencies (both institutionalized and specialized/professional) have instituted specific requirements for documentation of explicit assessment processes and evidence of routine uses of assessment data in program improvement. With ever-increasing calls for accountability, and particularly for resource accountability, there are regular demands for clear assessment data.

Beginning the Assessment Process

In beginning any assessment, one should ask a series of key questions. The answers to these questions will frame the design of your assessment:

- What is the aim of your assessment?
- Who wants or needs the assessment information?
- What resources are available to support the assessment?
- Who will conduct the assessment?
- How can you ensure the results are used?

These questions are important for a number of reasons. The assessment should have an aim and a stated purpose. Without a purpose there may be little reason to carry forward the work of the assessment. The person or agency who wants or needs the assessment may dictate the nature of the work carried out—is this mandated by a funder, is it part of an accreditation or other regulatory review, is it

part of an individual's personal performance review? It is necessary to know what resources will support the assessment and who will do the work: Often, assessments are designed without a clear understanding of the resource implications, which results in frustration because the plans do not match the realities of available resources and expertise. Finally, it is important to be able to ensure that the conclusions based on the results of an assessment will be attended to and used; few things are as frustrating as designing and conducting a comprehensive assessment of a program and then having the recommendations ignored. "Results" are facts and do not in of themselves suggest anything.

Organizations and individuals are continuously changing and adapting. A structured assessment initiative helps organizations and the individuals who participate in them to monitor activities, identify changes, and develop plans for continually improving their work. In the academic setting, much of this work will be done by faculty who are by nature inquisitive and spend much of their professional time asking and answering questions, and developing ideas for the next set of questions. This is the essential nature of assessment. Gray (1997) has noted that such activity requires understanding innovation, identifying leadership, and facilitating change strategies to accomplish the goals of assessment.

Assessment may vary in the scope of its focus and may consider different constituencies, depending on its purpose. In the context of institutional review for regional accreditation, the assessment program might be university-wide. A department or program might undertake assessment for internal review purposes, for review by a state entity or a specialized accreditor, or as part of departmental/program planning. Campus-wide general education programs are often the focus of assessment in order to gain greater understanding of cross-departmental programs that have an impact on multiple student populations within the university. Much of the assessment literature focuses on assessment of students—their learning, performance, and preparation for various careers. It can be argued, however, that this provides a narrow perspective; to gain a true comprehensive assessment picture one must also consider faculty, institutional mandates, community agencies, and other key stakeholders. Unfortunately, such broad assessment may consume significant resources, and therefore many institutions focus only on student assessment.

Who Should be Involved in Assessment?

Successful assessment requires bringing together key players, and helping these individuals to step outside of their normal roles and create a new culture—one that facilitates pooling their collective interests to focus on the program, service, or other entity being assessed. As a result, assessment can have a significant transformational impact on the organization (Magruder et al., 1997).

There is considerable debate about the merits of centralized versus decentralized responsibility for assessment. In some institutions, a central office has been developed, providing a focus within the institution's administrative structure for assessment and serving as a campus-wide resource (see, for example, Palomba, 1997). Establishment of a central office is viewed as evidence of the institution's commitment to assessment. One potentially negative aspect of a central office is that many faculty and departments may view assessment as the singular responsibility of that office, and not something that they need to be involved in. This may be overcome by using the central office as a resource that supports, encourages and facilitates departmental or programmatic assessment while clearly remaining "hands-off" from routine assessment activities. Those with the most knowledge of the activity to be assessed (e.g., departmental faculty) should be the ones designing, implementing, and analyzing the assessment activities and results.

Common Themes and Concerns in Beginning Assessment

A number of concerns are often raised at the beginning of assessment efforts. One has to do with identifying appropriate and affordable expertise. In academic institutions, despite the presence of

a number of disciplines where one might expect to find assessment or evaluation expertise, there are often few individuals who have the particular expertise to design, lead and manage curricular assessments. In some institutions such expertise may be found, but the few individuals with expertise are requested by everyone and are unable to meet the many needs of all university interests (and they may have different personal scholarly interests).

A second concern relates to conceptualizing assessment—what is to be assessed? When? For whom and for what purposes? The core questions previously identified can help to answer these questions, but it may take considerable discussion to reach agreement on framing the assessment plan. Once the assessment is conceptualized, the next concern often has to do with implementation—who is responsible, what resources do they have, what leverage do they have for people to participate in assessment activities and cooperate in responding to data needs in a timely manner?

Yet another concern relates to selection of assessment methods. If plans and needs are clearly set out and agreed upon, there may be greater agreement upon methods—but many experiences in the academic setting suggest that each participant may feel that they are the expert who should dictate the method (and therefore resist other methods). One of the results of this methods debate is often the ongoing qualitative versus quantitative discussion—leading to questions of appropriateness, validity of results, generalizability, and other challenges. These questions then lead to discussions of rigor, specification of methodological needs, and ultimately to design issues that may go beyond the resources available to support the assessment work.

The final concern encountered frequently rests with the uses of assessment findings. Once again, these concerns may be avoided if there is discussion and agreement from early in the process on what will be done with the data. Perceptions of a "closed" process or one that may be intended to result in program closure or termination of faculty/staff positions will compromise the assessment process. These may be exacerbated by uncertainty about the uses of the data; thus, clarity of an open process with clear intentions of use will assist greatly in facilitating the assessment activities.

Resistance to Assessment

The best-designed plan with the most open process may still be met with resistance. The threat of findings and their use may be real or perceived. If outside experts are brought in (either to augment or to supplement internal experts), these outsiders may be intimidating as individuals fear airing their "dirty laundry" in public. Skeptics may question the rigor of the assessment plan and its methods, and may not be willing to accept that compromises in the "pure" scientific method are sometimes necessary to meet deadlines imposed by the academic calendar (such as courses defined by an eleven-week quarter system). There are issues of training to develop internal capacity to conduct and manage the various components of the assessment, as well as issues of supervision, data collection, confidentiality, and data management. Finally, resistance arises when the environment is politically charged and there is skepticism about the political motivation for a new interest in assessment. Of particular concern may be a perception that there is competition for resources, and the assessment initiative will provide the data to resolve who gets access to certain resources or privileges in future.

While each situation is unique, there are some generally agreed upon responses that may help to overcome this resistance. Agreement upon the purposes of the assessment, public sharing of these purposes, and adherence to the scope of the assessment will help to establish the authenticity and sincerity of the assessment effort. Energy should be invested by the leaders of the assessment initiative to build buy-in for the value of assessment. Roles and tasks should be clearly defined early in the process, and leaders should implement mechanisms for regular reporting, sharing of findings, updates, and airing of concerns.

Assessment as an Improvement Strategy

Assessment can be viewed as a strategy for improvement—an integrated set of activities designed to identify strengths and areas for improvement, and to provide the evidence that will serve as the basis for future program planning and enhancements. Assessment becomes most valuable when viewed as a value-added routine activity and not just a burdensome add-on or "busy work."

This approach to assessment builds upon the "Model for Improvement" (Langley, Nolan et al., 1998), which has been used widely throughout various industries including higher education. The model consists of three basic elements that form the basis for initiating assessment:

- "What are we trying to accomplish?" The statement of the aim clarifies the purpose of the assessment.
- "How will we know that a change is an improvement?" This clarifies current knowledge and identifies the new knowledge that will be gained when the assessment is completed.
- "What changes can we try that will result in improvement?" This helps to define what activities might be tried as initial improvement activities using the new knowledge.

In applications of this model in education, the following questions are useful to frame the assessment process:

- How is learning conducted (for example, service learning or learning grounded in community-university partnerships)?
- How does this pedagogical method become part of the curriculum—how is it introduced, how is it developed, how is it integrated?
- How can this educational method be improved?
- How do individuals using this method know that a change is an improvement (i.e., what comparisons can be made using pre- and post-data)?

In thinking of assessment as an improvement effort, one can delineate issues that otherwise might not be obvious; describe strategies that could be replicated in the future; highlight areas where further work is needed; celebrate successes (which might otherwise go unrecognized); and focus thinking which otherwise might not be focused. The results provide the basis for shared learning with others. This sharing might be done through internal communications within the organization, or through broader external dissemination via presentations at professional meetings, publications in professional literature, and postings on websites. In short, people experienced in assessment can help others, so as to avoid making the same mistakes and to accelerate the process through others' key learning.

What is the Impact of Assessment Efforts?

Assessment efforts result in many benefits; for example, strengths in curriculum may be identified, validating existing knowledge and providing data to support continuation of these curricular activities. Similarly, deficiencies may be identified, providing evidence and justification for making changes—in individual courses, by adding/deleting courses, or by reconfiguring curriculum requirements or sequencing. Assessment may also be helpful in identifying areas where faculty resources might be reallocated, and where faculty may be recognized for excellence

or assisted to remedy deficiencies. Institutional assessment is vital in order to consider broader issues of resources allocation (human, fiscal, physical, information, technological, and other resources), to inform public relations and marketing strategies, and to consider possible changes or realignments in organizational relationships and strategies. Some useful descriptions of experience with assessment at institutions are provided by Palomba (1997) and Williford (1997).

One of the key factors in assessment, as in any other evaluation or improvement effort, is the obvious use of the results. Assessment is often resisted because of a lack of understanding of the motivation for assessment, its intended purposes and outcomes, and the perception that the results will not be shared or used. High visibility of assessment initiatives must be accompanied by high visibility of serious consideration of the results and evidence of use by decision makers. Assessment results may inform decision makers not only about curricular issues, but also about research and scholarly activity, public service, community image, and other key issues.

What Are Some Practical Approaches to Assessment?

Over the past five years a multiconstituency approach to assessment has been developed, initially for use in the assessment of service learning and now used in broader applications of a range of community-based learning. This approach initially was developed at Portland State University as part of an assessment of the general education program (Driscoll, Holland et al., 1996), and was designed to assess the impact of service learning on students, faculty, the institution, and the community. The model was further developed for evaluation of a national demonstration of service learning in health professions education, the Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN) program (Gelmon, Holland and Shinnamon, 1998; Gelmon, Holland, Shinnamon and Morris, 1998; Gelmon, Holland, Seifer et al., 1998). This evaluation added a fifth component of community partnerships as a focus for assessment. In both of these cases the goal of the assessment was to learn about the implementation of service learning and its differential impact on various constituencies.

Subsequently, the model has been applied in other assessments of the impact of learning in the community. Two examples are: 1) the assessment of the Community-Based Quality Improvement in Education for the Health Professions (CBQIE-HP) program (Gelmon and Barnett, 1998; Gelmon, White, Carlson, and Norman, 2000) where interdisciplinary teams of health professions students worked on specific community health improvement projects, and

2) the evaluation of the Portland Tri-County Healthy Communities Initiative (Gelmon, McBride, Hill et al., 1999), a community development approach to build community collaborations that address specific community health problems. Each of these projects involved students, faculty and community partners working on community health improvement problems as part of academic course-based work. These various projects will be illustrated throughout this discussion as examples of assessment applications.

The methodology for all of these assessments was based on the development of a conceptual matrix which was derived from project goals, framed the assessment plan, guided the development of assessment instruments, and structured the data analysis and reporting. This approach, sometimes referred to as the "Concept-Indicator-Method" approach (Gelmon, Holland, and Shinnamon, 1998), involves four primary questions:

- What do we want to know? This helps the evaluator to articulate the aim of the assessment, based upon the project goals.

- What will we look for? This leads the evaluator to identify core concepts that are derived from the project goals and the aim of the assessment.

- What will we measure? For each core concept, relevant measurable indicators are specified which will enable the evaluator to measure change or status.

- How will we gather the evidence to demonstrate what we want to know? At this stage, the evaluator identifies or develops appropriate methods and tools by which to collect the information for each indicator, and identifies sources of the data.

An example of the matrix from the HPSISN service learning program (Gelmon, Holland, and Shinnamon, 1998) is shown in Table 2 for the research question "How has the HPSISN program affected university-community partnerships with respect to service learning in health professions education?" While there is a direct linear relationship between each concept and the related indicators, there is no such linear relationship to the methods and sources. In reality some methods would be used for each indicator, and some sources would provide data for each method, but not all sources would be involved in each method and not all methods would address each indicator.

This illustration highlights two of the key concepts related to impact on university-community partnerships. Identification of these concepts provided specific direction to the evaluation team and to the participating sites in focusing on the elements of the partnerships that were most relevant to the assessment.

Table 2: Sample Matrix for University-Community Partnerships

WHAT WILL WE LOOK FOR? (CONCEPTS)	WHAT WILL WE MEASURE? (INDICATORS)	HOW WILL IT BE MEASURED? (METHODS)	WHO WILL PROVIDE THE INFORMATION? (SOURCES)
Communication between partners and the university	Nature of relationship Form and patterns of community involvement in university activities Kinds of communication	Surveys Interviews Focus groups Direct observation	Community partners Faculty Students Institutional administrators
Nature of partnership	Kind of activities conducted Frequency Method of initiation	Interviews Activity logs Syllabus review Faculty journals	Community partners Faculty Institutional administrators

The evaluation of the Portland Tri-County Healthy Communities Initiative was part of a national evaluation of the W. K. Kellogg-funded "Community Care Network" demonstration project (Gelmon, McBride, Hill et al., 1999). Two of the project strategies related to facilitating health sector participation in collaborative community development activities, and served as a regional resource and clearinghouse for information. As a result, different kinds of key concepts were identified for this evaluation, as compared to those presented for the HPSISN project. Table 3 illustrates some of this project's methodology.

Table 3: Sample Matrix for Community Development Initiatives			
WHAT WILL WE LOOK FOR? (CONCEPTS)	WHAT WILL WE MEASURE? (INDICATORS)	HOW WILL IT BE MEASURED? (METHODS)	WHO WILL PROVIDE THE INFORMATION? (SOURCES)
Building community health improvement capacity	Community development training Problem-solving skill development Management within fixed resources Adaptability	Surveys Community survey Task force survey Document review Interviews Focus groups Direct observation	Community database Governing Council Task force members Healthy Communities staff Health systems leadership group
Collaboration	Community representation on Governing Council Community representation task forces Satisfaction with partnerships Relationship to health systems Participation in related initiatives	Observations Focus groups Task force survey Document review Interviews	Governing Council Health systems leadership group Task force members Community database

In this case, the emphasis of the project was not on service learning but rather on the role of the Healthy Communities initiative in achieving various community development goals. The service-learning component involved students participating in parts of the initiative through course-based learning; thus this matrix does not emphasize the role of students and faculty, but rather places more emphasis on the community partners in the various activities (of which the students' home university was one).

Another example is offered from the CBQIE-HP program where interdisciplinary teams of health professions students worked on specific community health improvement projects (Gelmon and Barnett, 1998; Gelmon, White, Carlson, and Norman, 2000). In this project one area of interest was assessing whether the integration of an improvement philosophy into community-based learning projects accelerated health improvement and accentuated benefits. The question of benefits was considered from the perspective of benefits to students, faculty, the academic institution, and the community, as well as the benefits of the partnership. Table 4 illustrates some of the methodology related to benefits to students.

This illustration provides information that may be more readily applicable to assessment of service-learning programs in other institutions, since it places considerable emphasis on benefits to students. Similarly, the Portland State University application considered impact on students, but also assessed impact on faculty (among other constituencies). A portion of the Portland State matrix is shown in Table 5 (Driscoll, Gelmon et al., 1998).

Table 4: Sample Matrix for Benefits to Students			
WHAT WILL WE LOOK FOR? (CONCEPTS)	WHAT WILL WE MEASURE? (INDICATORS)	HOW WILL IT BE MEASURED? (METHODS)	WHO WILL PROVIDE THE INFORMATION? (SOURCES)
Commitment to community service	Attitude toward involvement Level of participation over time Plans for future service Plans for future service	Surveys Focus groups Interviews Reflective journal	Students Community partners Faculty Community-based learning coordinator
Personal and professional development	Changes in awareness of personal skills and capacities Communication skills Self-confident Leadership activities	Interviews Observations Focus groups Reflective journal	Students Faculty Community-based learning coordinator

There are many other descriptions in the literature of programmatic, departmental, and institutional approaches to assessment. The reader is encouraged to look further for other illustrations that have most relevance to her/his own assessment needs, and to draw upon the experiences in the literature to shape an assessment plan.

Completing the Assessment cycle

This article has focused on the methods used to conceptualize an assessment plan, and offered illustrations of a variety of projects addressing service learning and civic engagement. Once data is collected, assessment leaders must be prepared to engage in extensive data analysis, synthesis, discussion, and report writing. The experience in each of the projects described here has been that a mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative methods is the most useful. Methods should be selected based on the kind of data that will be gathered, as well as issues such as ease of data collection and analysis, and time and costs involved in both collection and analysis. However, consideration must also be given to the richness of the data that can be derived from various methods. Methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and reflective journals will provide extensive and detailed information, which will necessitate a major time commitment to transcribe and analyze. In contrast, surveys will provide less detail and individual stories, but are relatively easy, inexpensive, and time-efficient to administer and to analyze. Assessment leaders who do not have familiarity and expertise with various assessment methods should ensure they engage an expert to advise during instrument development as well as data analysis.

A final step in the process is to report the results. A fairly typical method is to write an assessment report that describes project goals, what was done, what was measured, and the results. The reporting of results should be guided explicitly by the matrix (using the concepts as major headings and the indicators as sub-headings); this will facilitate synthesis of findings and presentation in a report. It is also common for assessment results to form the basis for scholarly presentations and publications. Care should be given to ensuring that no confidential information is disclosed, and that the institution has given permission for its assessment findings to be released in a public forum.

Table 5: Sample Matrix for Impact on Faculty			
WHAT WILL WE LOOK FOR? (CONCEPTS)	WHAT WILL WE MEASURE? (INDICATORS)	HOW WILL IT BE MEASURED? (METHODS)	WHO WILL PROVIDE THE INFORMATION? (SOURCES)
Awareness of community	Definition of community Specific definition of community site Ability to describe conditions needs assets of community partner Knowledge of strengths and resources of community partner	Interviews Reflective journal Classroom observation	Faculty Students Community partners Community-based learning coordinator (or community-university partnerships coordinator)
Scholarship emphasis	Connection of community-based learning to scholarly agenda Evidence of community-based scholarship to publications, presentations, grants	Interviews Surveys Portfolio reviews Curriculum vitae review Reflective journal Artifacts (papers, grant proposals, presentations)	Faculty Community-based learning coordinator Institutional research office University administrators

Consideration should also be given to alternative forms of reporting to ensure wider and more rapid dissemination. For example, summaries of key findings could be presented in poster format and displayed in a campus cafeteria or in the library. Selected results and rich stories from participants could be integrated into a university website. Alternative forms of reporting can also be used. For example, in the Healthy Communities initiative a detailed evaluation report was prepared for the national demonstration program and the local board; this was then edited considerably and reformatted into a brief "Report to the Community" in a community-friendly format with photographs. This report has been used widely by the community agency for promotional purposes and as documentation in grant proposals.

Assessment provides a valuable mechanism for communicating the value of our work. In particular, when seeking to document the effect of pedagogy such as service learning it is vital to be able to provide the evidence that the program is making a difference. Good assessment requires collaboration and a commitment to invest time and energy in the work. The very nature of assessment necessitates a long-term perspective, as the assessment effort is never complete. Nonetheless, continuous investment in assessment will provide the necessary information to continue to respond to the needs and assets of those involved in higher education and to seek continued improvement of the programs and services we provide.

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