

Ten Years in the Trenches: Faculty Perspectives on Sustaining Service-Learning

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Abstract

This study reports the perceptions of faculty 10 years after participating and sustaining their involvement in academic service-learning. Issues explored include why participants became involved in service-learning, the perceived impact on the promotion and tenure process, the challenges and rewards reaped by participants, and what sustained them in their work. The study is unique in that faculty report on the factors that have impeded or allowed them to sustain their involvement in service-learning over a period of 10 years. The study supports earlier findings that suggest faculty become involved for a variety of reasons, primarily the potential outcomes that service-learning provides and the opportunity to work in an interdisciplinary fashion; that service-learning can have both a positive and negative impact on promotion and tenure; and that support at the institutional level is essential for engaging faculty in service-learning.

Keywords

higher education, faculty, service-learning

For the last several decades, service-learning has emerged as a powerful pedagogy for enhancing student learning, engaging students in the classroom, and increasing students' sense of civic responsibility (Ehrlich, 2000). It has been described as both a pedagogy, philosophy and a program type. Jacoby (1996) defined service-learning as,

A form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally

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designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key components of service-learning. (p. 5)

Civic education and social responsibility have long been touted as central outcomes of a higher education (Ehrlich, 2000). Documents such as *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2003) have also identified humanitarianism and civic education as an important outcome that both faculty and student affairs professionals should instill in students. High impact experiences, such as service-learning, internships, learning communities, and capstone experiences, among others, have also been identified as significant to student learning (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt., 2005). Service-learning appears to be a significant way to address these educational goals.

While student outcomes for involvement in service-learning have been well documented in the literature, less is known about the impact on and persistence of faculty engaged in this pedagogy. To more broadly institutionalize and sustain service-learning, it is essential to better understand the issues facing faculty utilizing service-learning. This qualitative case study explored how faculty who have been involved in service-learning for 10 or more years viewed their experience.

Review of the Literature

The outcomes for student participation in service-learning are evident throughout the research literature. In particular, outcomes such as increases in racial understanding (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001), intellectual and ethical development (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler et al., 2001; Deely, 2010; Novak, Markey, & Allen., 2007), engagement in the classroom (Eyler et al., 2001), retention (Bringle, 2010), development of personal and life skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler et al., 2001), sense of civic and social responsibility (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler et al., 2001; Kendrick, 1996), and deeper understanding of complex social problems (Batchelder & Root, 1994) have been identified. As a result of these varied outcomes, some have argued for the broader dissemination of service-learning throughout the academy (Bringle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2010).

What has been less reported in the literature is how faculty perceive, experience, and value service-learning as a pedagogy. While the need to address outcomes for faculty were identified as part of a national research agenda for service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1998), fewer than 10 studies have been conducted that report on faculty experiences. Within the literature are studies that report the challenges faculty face when adopting this pedagogy (Hou, 2009), how faculty perceive the integration of service, scholarship, and teaching (Bloomgarden & O'Meara, 2007), the varying roles of service among faculty (Ward, 2003), faculty experience with a service-learning seminar (Stanton, 1994), factors that motivate faculty to engage in service-learning (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002; Hammond, 1994), how faculty view service-learning as scholarship (Schnaubelt & Stratham, 2007), and how service-learning shapes and influences teaching and learning (Pribbenow, 2005). In particular, Abes et al. (2002) identified "factors related to time, logistics, and funding; student and community outcomes; reward structures; and comfort and ability to effectively use service-learning"

(p. 10) as barriers for faculty. In their study, the two strongest potential deterrents were the time-intensive nature of service-learning and challenges with coordinating projects in the community. Hou (2009) also explored challenges for faculty adopting service-learning and addressed the time commitment and additional planning required, as well as student anxiety related to service-learning requirements.

While what has been reported adds to our understanding of faculty perspectives of service-learning, much is yet to be learned. In particular, perceptions of faculty who have sustained their work in service-learning need to be more fully explored.

Method

During the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 academic years, a medium-sized public institution in the Midwestern United States began an initiative titled *Presidential Service-Learning Scholars* (PSLS) program in which 14 faculty members, 2 from each of the institution's seven academic divisions, engaged in the pedagogy of service-learning. As part of the program, faculty attended a day long training session on service-learning, met monthly as a cohort to discuss their work, and developed a course that integrated a service-learning component. Participants were provided with a small stipend and professional development funds. They were also asked to submit an evaluation of their project. The program was targeted at tenure-track faculty, although selection of participants was left to the discretion of the academic deans.

Ten years after their participation in the program, 13 of the original participants (one had left the institution) were invited to participate in a study on their perspectives related to this experience. The study was framed as a case study of a single institution focusing on its faculty development program to garner a deeper understanding of the impact on faculty using service-learning. Nine of the original 14 (64%) agreed to participate in semistructured, 1-hr interviews.

Participants represented a diverse mix of genders (five women and four men) with limited racial diversity (seven identified as Caucasian, one as African American, and one as biracial). The academic disciplines represented were also fairly diverse; participants included two faculty from Education, and one participant each from Art, Business, Social Work, Nursing, Public Administration, Engineering and Liberal Studies.

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and then sent to the participants to ensure the accuracy of their responses. A constructivist approach was deemed appropriate given the relationship of the researcher to the study participants. A constant comparative method was employed to glean subthemes, and patterns from the broad themes introduced to the participants and involved "comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 30). Individual responses were compared across each of the broad areas discussed, and themes and patterns that emerged from this analysis are presented. A review of the literature was a part of the data analysis—many of the issues addressed in this study have been reported in the literature and guided the researcher in identifying additional

themes and issues inherent in participant responses. This process helped to increase the trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam, 2009).

Results

Four a priori broad themes were discussed with each participant, and a summary of the findings from these discussions are presented here. The four a priori themes included participant's reasons for engaging in service-learning, perceived impact on promotion and tenure, challenges and rewards experienced, and what sustained them in their work.

Why Faculty Choose Service-Learning as a Pedagogy

Given the diverse group of academic disciplines represented in the study, faculty identified a variety of reasons for becoming involved in service-learning, a finding that is supported by earlier research (Abes et al., 2002; Hou, 2009). Several characteristics emerged that influenced participants' decision to become involved. Among these were prior experience with service-learning (both at previous institutions and in their doctoral programs) and previous experience in the nonprofit sector. Another theme was a personal commitment to civic engagement (expressed as a moral obligation by one participant) in which connecting students with communities and real-world problems were paramount. The theoretical underpinnings of service-learning was also cited as a factor for several participants' involvement.

The literature has reported that faculty engage in service-learning for myriad reasons (McKay & Rozee, 2004). Among these reasons were having specific goals and appropriate theory and the importance of institutional support (Abes et al., 2002; Hammond, 1994; Stanton, 1994). Personal experience with service (Hammond, 1994) and communication-centered factors, such as encouragement from other faculty and students (Abes et al., 2002), have also been addressed as important to faculty. Improved student outcomes are also cited as a motivator for faculty engagement in service-learning (Abes et al., 2002; Hammond, 1994; Hesser, 1995).

Faculty participants in the present study also addressed why they became involved in the PSLS program in particular. As indicated, the program was conceived as having a formal nominating process initiated by the academic deans within each of the seven academic divisions at the institution. Six of the nine participants indicated that their academic dean was the primary person who encouraged their involvement, while three participants indicated that a senior-level administrator at the institution was the primary person who encouraged their involvement. Participants also discussed the importance of secondary support from other colleagues in their department or division. In two cases, support from the deans was construed as merely political.

A new finding reported here is the role that senior-level administrators play in advocating service-learning, as indicated by several participants:

I remember very early on (a high level administrator) was really very savvy about making this a priority of the university and I don't how much of that came from her or if it came from the President . . . she was proactive about it, the leadership.

This institutional-level support from chief academic officers, along with support from colleagues within a faculty member's unit, was perceived as very important to most participants especially when support from the academic dean may have been nominal. For tenure-track faculty, awareness of this level of support can be particularly important.

Connecting students with local communities and real-world problems was the most commonly cited reason for the involvement of participants in the study. One faculty member shared that perspective this way:

I think everyone (in my discipline) shared the philosophy of service-learning that you should also engage with communities and that's not only an important part of your academic program but also in your research agenda . . . (using) the community as a laboratory of study . . . seemed like a really appropriate (way) to try innovative things and try to connect some service-learning-components.

A faculty member in engineering put this perspective another way, stating,

Because I thought to myself that it was really important that engineers become involved in some level of civic engagement and because it is important for citizenship and because so many of our courses are highly technical in nature . . . we're doing design work and it is very far removed from the real world of people . . . and the real world of what engineers can do to make the world better . . .

Infusing service-learning into general education and making cross-disciplinary connections were also addressed by several participants, as well as the politics of service-learning and the accountability movement at the time:

I was very aware of the pressures from the federal government for academia to be applied but I kind of understood the political motivations for things like service-learning. General education was beginning to be changed at (the institution), and so I immediately looked at those aims and immediately saw ways that I could be more substantively involved.

Another faculty member articulated their involvement in service-learning by stating that

I was a second year faculty member, a lot of demands, and anybody in (that) position (has) to make some choices about what you do so there was some honor with this and there was some resources with it and there was a clear vision about the ideology of service-learning and how it could benefit (the institution) and that impetus I think was really instrumental early on. I was basically challenged to do this and I responded to that.

Engaging faculty in service-learning requires support from colleagues, deans, and senior-level management. Highlighting the interdisciplinary nature and the theoretical roots of service-learning is another way to attract faculty. Providing resources and incentives to faculty to engage in service-learning is also critical. The "prestige" of a

university-wide initiative to engage faculty in service-learning was also perceived as important to all participants.

Perceived Impact on Tenure and Promotion

Incorporating service-learning into one's teaching, research, and service does not come without its challenges, including the promotion and tenure process (Bloomgarden, 2007; O'Meara, 2009). Tenure traditionally focuses on a faculty member's teaching, scholarship, and service, although the focus on each of these is often dependent on the Carnegie Classification of the institution (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Two broad themes identified here were disciplinary and departmental acceptance of service-learning as a pedagogy and the commitment required for service-learning to be effective.

As indicated, two participants had already been granted tenure prior to their involvement in the program. Of the seven faculty who participated in the study who were on tenure-track at the time, most indicated that their involvement in service-learning had a positive impact on their tenure decision. Three participants, however, suggested that service-learning was perceived by some of their colleagues as nontraditional.

McKay and Rozee (2004) support the notion that systematic support within the institution is paramount for faculty who utilize service-learning. Colleague's negative or unfavorable attitudes toward service-learning have also been identified as deterrents to engaging in the pedagogy (Harwood et al., 2005).

For faculty who indicated service-learning helped with their promotion and tenure process, integrating the three components of teaching, research, and service were important; balancing all three and including other traditional forms of scholarship were stressed. With regard to integrating these three components, several participants emphasized the important balance that must be maintained:

I think maybe social work is not the only discipline but one of the disciplines where service-learning can help faculty integrate their service, teaching and scholarship roles, they are not separate, they can be combined . . . And that is the key, you can do this work and then there is scholarship that comes from it. I think it had an impact on (my) tenure because social work places more emphasis on service but there were a couple of colleagues that were in the (PSLS) program (from other disciplines) that did say that they were going to downplay their service piece because the faculty didn't view it as important.

For one participant in the art department, these challenges were articulated by saying that

I think (my scholarship) has been informed by it, I've maintained an independent studio practice but I have also done some writing and a lot of lecturing and visiting artist things, conferences, around the work of (the PSLS project) but it has been productive in a scholarly way and I have been able to share that stuff publicly . . . it informs my studio practice with some flow back and forth.

The important balance among traditional forms of teaching and scholarship was articulated by one participant in this way:

I think I did enough in those areas to satisfy (teaching, scholarship and service) so I realized that (service-learning) wasn't enough to put all of my eggs in that kind of work. I also had other things going on but I think for some folks, because it is very time intensive, some folks might find themselves in trouble. I think people appreciated (my work in service-learning), as I went through promotion and tenure, all of that certainly was helpful.

Three participants suggested that service-learning did not have an impact, or possibly had a negative impact, on the promotion and tenure process. One previously tenured faculty reported struggles with their dean over service-learning and stated, "Thank goodness (I had tenure) or I would have been fired." She articulated that this was primarily due to the high visibility and political nature of her project and the attention it had garnered for the division and the institution. She further articulated her experience by stating that

I resigned from (my department) because I could not work there anymore. I realized that one of the mistakes I made in trying to perpetuate the (service-learning) project was that I did not meet the narcissistic needs of my dean well enough . . . it didn't even occur to me . . . I made mistakes, I should have been more savvy about building a sustainable power base, I should have been more savvy about polishing the shoes of administrators more thoroughly.

In reflecting on her tenure and promotion decision, one participant from the business faculty stated,

As an untenured faculty member . . . I had challenges in getting tenure . . . I had a hard time going through that process but part of it was a lot of my research was service based and my colleagues didn't (support it). I remember having those discussions . . . about how that sort of research and that sort of work wasn't valued (in my department). I remember (the provost) saying something like that to me in his office, you know, (it wasn't supported) within the College of Business.

This particular participant further elaborated on how her involvement in the PSLS was also an asset to the promotion and tenure process.

I wouldn't say they embraced it but I wouldn't say they totally rejected it either . . . because it was something new and because it wasn't supported that much. If I would have had a smaller (class) and more time to develop it and dedicate to it I think they would have really liked it . . . there weren't any complaints in my student evaluations . . . It was a new thing for me too. Anytime you start something new like that there are little glitches that you want to iron out.

The structure and institutional nature of the PSLS program was identified as important to the tenure and promotion process by several participants, suggesting that

One of the things that helped me get through that process (promotion and tenure) was that I had (the PSLS program) in my favor, not that anybody said that, but (I had) letters from

the president and letters from (another executive officer) and I won the (service-learning) award, (but) you could be exemplary in service and just okay in the other ones and you'll get dinged for it.

The need for support from colleagues was articulated by another participant in this way:

Usually they are happy that somebody is doing civic engagement and sometimes they are thankful, well (she) is doing it, so (our department) is doing it. But I still get "doesn't write enough papers, isn't professionally active," for me this is professionally active, this is what (people in my discipline) ought to do . . . it is like she has taken care of that box for us. A lot of our industry supporters like the idea that there is community service here and that we're teaching it but . . .

Engaging in service-learning can impact the tenure and promotion process in positive and negative ways. Positive factors include using service-learning as a way of integrating one's teaching, scholarship, and service. It can also bring visibility to the institution and the faculty member and encourage faculty to reflect more deeply on their teaching. Faculty on tenure-track, however, need to be aware of how their discipline, academic dean, and colleagues view service-learning and the potential political factors that can emerge. Tenure-track faculty also need to be involved in other forms of traditional scholarship and be provided with the necessary time and resources to develop effective service-learning projects. Incorporating service-learning into one's courses can be challenging and time-consuming, and faculty need to be aware of the broad expectations of colleagues in their department with regard to promotion and tenure.

Challenges and Rewards

Several studies have identified challenges and or deterrents to implementing service-learning in the curriculum (Abes et al., 2002; Hou, 2009). Among these challenges is the time commitment required of both faculty and students, support from the institution and colleagues, fund-raising and resources, and reward structures. Many of these themes were reiterated by participants in the present study.

Addressing the challenges sometimes inherent in incorporating service-learning into the curriculum was addressed by several participants:

I still have difficulty with how to set up those interactions and how to help students to understand those interactions and how not to be condescending . . . I still think there is a huge opportunity for us to teach our students how to approach different cultures, how to understand it, and then how to be helpful without being arrogant, it is still very difficult.

Philosophical and political challenges related to service-learning as well as the need to challenge one's self in the teaching and learning process were also addressed:

When an artist goes to give an underserved community a voice then that is a kind of way of flipping that, becoming temporarily an authority, but it is also a kind of repression of that population so it is complicated and there are complicated issues. Do I . . . go back to the studio or is this rich terrain and can I navigate this and I decided to dig into it. But it takes a lot of energy and a lot of reflection and moves kind of slowly but it has been a real fruitful learning environment for the students . . . we are in a situation of taking advantage of the community and we arrive on the dime of the university . . . with all of our powers and freedoms and privileges we (can) have our way with the situation, we retract ourselves afterwards, and that is problematic.

The time commitment required to implement service-learning has frequently been addressed in the literature as an issue that can be challenging for faculty.

It took a lot of work to develop the curriculum, to think it through and to see it through and the initial implementation of it in the department; it is a lot of work. I'm not complaining, I think it is a great opportunity and it is a great program . . .

Another faculty member articulated the challenges that students in her discipline (education) face when confronted with the time demands of service-learning:

It is difficult (for education students) to do a lot of service-learning because they are already out in the schools and they have so many requirements already and service is who they already are so adding another component can be difficult. I feel if they have that foundational information (on service-learning) and they have somewhat of a plan then when they have their own classroom their likelihood of using it will be much greater.

Service-learning, when incorporated into the curriculum effectively, is challenging and time-consuming work for faculty. While the issue of time commitment related to service-learning has long been identified in the literature, with higher education's renewed focus on teaching and learning, it can be argued that any pedagogy that emphasizes effective teaching and learning will require more time.

Faculty are also sensitive to the challenge of being respectful to the local community, helping students overcome their stereotypes, and deciding where service-learning might best fit into their courses. Engaging in service-learning can also create long-lasting relationships with community partners and with the students involved in the projects.

What Sustains Faculty in Their Service-Learning Work

Sustaining service-learning among faculty has not been addressed in the literature. Themes identified included long term impact on students and the community, connections and contributions students make, employment opportunities for students, helping faculty stay connected to disciplinary issues in the community, and the opportunity to get other faculty involved in the "excitement" around learning, a construct addressed by most participants.

Five of the nine faculty participants have continued their service-learning projects after 12 years. Two have moved on to administrative roles that changed their teaching responsibilities (one became a dean and another department chair). Two others did not sustain their work due to a perceived lack of support from deans and colleagues, even after earning tenure.

One participant reflected on the way in which service-learning transformed their own teaching and learning and how this sustains their work:

It is a messy business and when education is messy it is problematic and over time you have to come with the same clarity of vision. One of the things I've done is to try and make each project different and unique for me so that I am in a position of learning as we move into it so that I don't have to be in a situation where I don't know what is going to happen, also putting the project at risk in terms of its success and using methods of reflection and trying to be reciprocal, being risk taking with that has also been really helpful.

Many participants pointed to the perceived impact their involvement in service-learning had on students and the community as reasons for sustaining their work.

If you look at the impact you are having in the community (and) think of the impact you could have with the number of students that you will have contact with . . . you're going to have a greater impact on the local and international community with your work and that's the thing from day one which sustained me . . .

Several participants sustained their work through the excitement generated by the projects and the impact on students:

It is that excitement and when you see students and they are talking about what they're doing and their future and even in some small way you can say I played a role in that, that is just an unbelievable feeling and that is what sustains me, keeps me excited about the job.

Other participants sustained their work through a focus on citizenship within their discipline:

I am getting them ready to be citizens and I am trying to get them to see you have a great privilege by having this knowledge and to be able to do these things . . . you take responsibility equal to your knowledge and somehow that needs to get drummed into them and it's really incredibly hard to do because it is not in any of these textbooks . . . nobody talks about it, they talk about the technical topic at hand, they do not talk about civic engagement.

Service-learning is sustained by other faculty in that it informs ones teaching and provides new perspectives:

That is what I think the primary benefit is for an instructor doing this kind of work: I am getting constant feedback about the course and I stay informed about the latest

developments, students come back and report about all of the work they are doing in the field and that is kind of exciting to always stay on the cutting edge . . . I think the things that people have done around the (PSLS) projects and the broader curriculum have just been kind of amazing . . . What former students have gone and done, the kind of network of people (that is developed) I think is good. The other thing, and this is part of the department support, is that there has been some younger colleagues (who have) come into the department who are excited and interested in this.

It appears that faculty who sustain service-learning do so because of the transformative nature of the pedagogy. This transformation can impact students, faculty, and the community on a number of levels. Service-learning can inform one's teaching practice and help faculty stay connected to local and global issues in the community. Some faculty do not sustain their service-learning work due to changing administrative roles and lack of support from deans and colleagues.

Discussion

While the impact of service-learning on faculty has been less reported in the literature, this study addressed a number of issues important to faculty in terms of why they get involved, the ways in which their involvement in service-learning impacted the tenure and promotion process, what challenges and rewards were faced as a result of their involvement, and how they have sustained their work.

This study supports the idea that faculty become involved in service-learning for a variety of reasons (Abes et al., 2002). An interest in community engagement and responsible citizenship are often the starting points for many faculty. Being aware of student outcomes, the theoretical roots of service-learning and the opportunity to work with colleagues across the institution can also motivate faculty to engage in service-learning. Sharing these outcomes and theoretical roots with faculty across disciplines can help encourage more faculty to become involved.

Involvement in service-learning can impact the tenure and promotion process in a variety of ways, so it is critical that faculty be aware of the disciplinary constraints and support provided by colleagues, deans, and senior-level administrators. Making clear the role that service-learning plays in personnel committees and reward structures is paramount. Participating in other forms of traditional scholarship, in addition to service-learning, may also be important to tenure-track faculty. Institutions should review their personnel processes and find ways to recognize that involvement in service-learning can inform a faculty member's teaching, scholarship, and service.

Service-learning can be time-consuming and messy work. When provided with the proper support, faculty can effectively incorporate service-learning into their courses and impact student-learning outcomes, students' perceptions of community and social issues, and encourage ongoing responsible citizenship (Abes et al., 2009; Harwood et al., 2005). Institutionalizing and centralizing service-learning may help make this form of teaching more manageable for faculty.

Faculty who engage in service-learning are sustained by their commitment to social justice, by the impact they see that it can have on students, and the community, by the

way in which it informs and improves their own teaching, and the opportunity to interact with others across the institution who are engaged in service-learning work (Pribbenow, 2005). By stressing the student-learning outcomes of service-learning and emphasizing the social justice nature of this pedagogy institutions can both increase the number of faculty involved in service-learning and the number of faculty who choose to sustain their work.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the study. The first is that participants reflect perspectives from a single institution in the mid-West and one institutional type. Perspectives from faculty from other institutional types and other regions of the country would have strengthened the study. Also, while the academic disciplines represented were fairly diverse, additional disciplines would have added to the richness of perspectives. Five faculty did not respond to the request to participate in the study that would have added additional disciplinary perspectives.

Another limitation is that final reports submitted by participants were not available, which would have added some depth to the context of the experience for faculty involved. It is also important to point out that the institution involved was fairly new to the implementation of service-learning at the time that the PLSLS program was initiated. Faculty at institutions with a longer history of involvement in service-learning may have differing perspectives.

Recommendations

Higher education should continue to explore how service-learning impacts the faculty who choose to employ it and how a broader range of faculty could be encouraged to adopt this pedagogy. In particular, it is important to explore why disciplines such as business and engineering may have less support for service-learning and what might be done to address this issue. Further exploring how involvement in service-learning has transformed faculty teaching would also be fruitful.

Implementing faculty development programs to leverage the transformative teaching and learning capacity of service-learning is essential. Finding ways to identify faculty with an interest in service-learning and encouraging their involvement through clear reward structures is also paramount. Once these faculty have been identified, it is important to find ways to offer opportunities for them to collaborate and connect with other interested faculty in interdisciplinary ways. The role of senior academic administrators in supporting and advocating service-learning should also not be overlooked. Finally, recognizing faculty who have sustained their community engagement is another important way to encourage their ongoing work and inspire other faculty to become engaged as well.

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