Service-learning in Christian Higher Education:
Bringing Our Mission to Life

Regan Harwell Schaffer
Pepperdine University

Abstract

The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to develop a working definition of service-learning, identify the best practices of service-learning in the context of Christian colleges and universities and, based upon that information, develop a model for replication. The study undertaken included: (a) examination of the findings of unpublished data from a survey on service-learning at 90 Christian colleges and universities and notes from a conference on service-learning at faith-based institutions; (b) conducting a thorough review of the literature on service-learning and the mission and purpose of Christian higher education; and (c) interviewing practitioners from seven Christian colleges or universities that met prescribed criteria for best practices in service-learning. A content analysis resulted in a comprehensive definition of service-learning, key elements of best practices in service-learning and a model which incorporates eight guidelines for Christian colleges and universities to use in developing a service-learning program. The comprehensive definition incorporates characteristics from previous definitions, but includes an added component of institutional support for service-learning. The best practices in service-learning in Christian higher education corroborate this finding and include key elements. The model for designing a service-learning program at a Christian college builds further upon the definition and best practices and includes eight guidelines. The model guidelines are meant to address both the philosophical and practical implications in designing an effective service-learning course and program in Christian institutions of learning. The data from this study strongly suggest that Christian colleges and universities should implement service-learning as a means of

Introduction

Given their mission and philosophy, Christian colleges and universities should be institutions that use service-learning as a means to benefit the greater society and produce graduates committed to lives of service. Service-learning has been proven effective in meeting many of the objectives of Christian education but many Christian colleges and universities are either not using it or doing so insufficiently.

The Christian institution as a member of academia maintains as its primary purpose the development of intellectual growth among its students (DeJong, 1992). The emotional well-being of the students is also considered. Christian institutions are concerned with the affective domain of personality, psychological health, self-esteem, and maturity that are part of the emotional development of the student (Sandin, 1982). However, the distinguishing mark of the Christian college or university is the interest and emphasis upon the spiritual development of the student (Smith, 1996). As Sandin (1982) states, "the concerns of the Christian college in the area of theological knowledge, values clarification, and spiritual development inspire the hope that the education offered is something finer, more holistic, and more inclusive than is available at other types of institutions" (p. 44). Finally, the Christian college or university should prepare students to be active and engaged members of society (Benne, 2001). DeJong (1992) explained more fully when he stated, "the responsible citizenship advocated by church-related colleges seeks to pursue understanding across human, geographical, and cultural boundaries by shaping attitudes and behaviors that make for world peace" (p. 25). Holmes (1975) elaborated further: "the Christian college embodies a strategy for Christian involvement in the life of the mind and the life of a culture" (p. 116).

Service-learning fits this paradigm of the Christian college or university for several reasons. It is an effective learning tool as demonstrated in numerous studies which have shown positive outcomes in students' GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills and understanding of course content (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996). Service-learning enables students to participate in service to those in need, which is an integral component of the Christian faith (Longstroth, 1987), and reflect upon their experience in a manner which encourages emotional and spiritual questioning and growth (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Fenzel & Leary, 1997). Gordon Smith (1996), in his research on spiritual formation in the academy, stated:

> Spiritual formation happens when there are activities designed for specific ends in the formation of character that complement the formal academic program. Spiritual formation within the academic setting is most effective when the classroom is both

following criteria: (a) had an established service-learning program at their institution which had at least one full-time staff person (who was the contact for the interview); (b) the service-learning program must have utilized at least six of the seven characteristics identified in the literature as necessary for effective service-learning programs (which are outlined later in this article); and (c) the service-learning program must have been cited or recognized for its effectiveness outside of the college or university (through participation in a research study or cited in a service-learning or higher education publication).

The interviews were transcribed and a content analysis was performed with the use of an interrater and the findings tabulated. Based upon the results, a summary was made of the data and conclusions were drawn to address the research purposes.

Results

Defining Service-learning. The primary phase of the methodology enabled the researcher to determine a definition of service-learning based upon the literature review and subsequent studies in program development for service-learning. The researcher examined 70 research articles or texts on program characteristics of *effective* service-learning in which seven characteristics were deemed "significant". In order for a characteristic to be considered significant it had to be identified in at least 30% of the 70 articles examined. The researcher also considered the findings of the surveys and program interviews of "best practices" institutions when formulating the definition. What resulted was the following comprehensive definition: Effective service-learning takes place when: (a) the service is tied to the learning objectives of a course, (b) the community is involved in the teaching and learning process, (c) the service performed by the students meets a need that is identified by the community, (d) guided reflection, both oral and written, is required of the students, (e) the service performed is meaningful and appropriate for the course, (f) there is assessment and evaluation of student learning and the service-learning program, and (g) the institution (college or university) provides support and incentive for service-learning.

This comprehensive definition integrated previous explanations proposed by Howard (1998) and Kendall (1990), but incorporated an added dimension of institutional support. This seventh characteristic of institutional support was not only prevalent in the literature review, where it was stated by 33% of the sources, but also in the institutional interviews. As this article later explains, the responses in this area were significant and considered a necessary attribute in order for an institution to truly be able to have an effective service-learning program.

The program interviews with practitioners from Christian colleges and universities with best practices in service-learning corroborated many of the characteristics used in this definition. For instance, 86% of the respondents stated that the service should be tied to the learning objectives of a course (point 1 in the definition) and 71% stated that the service should meet a community need and that the community should be involved in the process (points 3 and 4 in the definition). Reflection was mentioned by 42% of the respondents (point

universities and results of the "best practices" program interviews. Five key elements of what constituted best practices emerged. Fifty percent or more of the colleges or universities included in the program interviews mentioned each of these elements. The elements are presented in no particular order and include the following: (a) Institutional Support, (b) Mission, (c) Definitions and Guidelines, (d) Academic Validity, and (e) Faith and Learning Tool.

    Institutional Support. In the program interviews, all (100%) of the respondents stated they had institutional support, which was defined as: operational funds, office space, salaries for at least one full-time staff person and resources for training and workshops. This coincides with the literature review and program interviews. Ed Zlotkowski (1998) and others (Caron, 1999; Mintz & Hesser, 1996; Ward, 1996) discussed specifically in their research the need for the leadership within a college or university to embrace the philosophical and pedagogical reasons for service-learning as a means to be a force for positive change in the campus culture and community. This form of headship provides the practical resources of facilitating the growth of service-learning on a college campus. Aside from operational and staffing funds, institutional support also included: formal encouragement from the

found in their extensive research, that one of the barriers to faculty using service-learning was simply not knowing what it is or how to effectively use it.

While determining a definition is helpful in educating people to what service-learning is, the research revealed that there is a greater need for guidelines on how to properly design service-learning. For example, creating a service-learning course and not tying the service directly to the learning objectives of the course will likely reap different learning outcomes than had the service been designed to connect to the objectives of the course. Likewise, for the students to synthesize the service and learning, some form of reflection is needed. If the students do not reflect, they often will not make the connections between their action and learning.

Academic Validity. Typically, what differentiates service-learning from other forms of experiential learning or volunteer work is its connection to course learning objectives. Enos and Troppe (1996) discussed this in their research, stating that service-learning gains its academic credibility based upon the precept that the service must be tied to the learning objectives of the course. Six of the seven colleges interviewed by the researcher have their service-learning program funded by the Academic Affairs portion of their institution and four of the seven report directly to the Chief Academic Officer. The research indicated that if faculty are to embrace service-learning, they must see the validity of the learning component and understand that the greatest learning takes place when there is an intentional connection between the service and learning objectives (Astin et al., 2000; Morton, 1993).

Faith and Learning Tool. The facet of this study that perhaps is most interesting for Christian colleges and universities is the relationship between service-learning and the integration of faith and learning. As the literature review accounted, most Christian colleges and universities have as a primary interest creating a campus culture that combines the acquisition of knowledge and the faith development of the student. The faith-based mission of Christian colleges calls them to this endeavor and yet it is a combination that has been addressed in a fragmented fashion through the curriculum and co-curriculum (Dirks, 1988). This faith perspective is concerned with the students' development of faith as well as an awareness and demonstration of love, peace and humility: all fruits of the spirit (Sandin, 1982).

Service-learning challenges students to consider what they believe as they confront situations and people that may question their motives or beliefs. Such philosophical and emotional challenges foster spiritual growth (Smith, 1996) and studies have shown that service-learning impacts students' spirituality and allows for them to make the connection between their personal faith and values and their service to the community. Therefore, it is not surprising that so many of the respondents in both the unpublished survey (98%) and the formal interviews (100%) believed that service-learning can be used as a tool for integrating faith and learning in the classroom. This coincides with the research that found that Christian colleges want to challenge students to draw parallels between what they experience in the world and how their faith calls them to respond.

When discussing how service-learning may be a tool for faith development, many of the respondents in the interviews pointed to the act of service itself. Service is Christian faith in action and service to the community is a fundamental basis of citizenship and should be an integral part of the students' experience while at the Christian institution. However, many institutions stop here and believe that simply engaging the students in community service is integrating faith development. The literature and respondents felt that service alone is not enough and that spiritual development is fostered in environments where students are challenged philosophically and emotionally and where they can see the relevance of faith in their everyday lives (McNeel, 1991; Parkyn & Parkyn, 1996).

This is where the academic and reflection components play a role. The academic component addresses issues of everyday living and decision-making. The reflection component allows for dialogue not only about the course content and service activity, but also about topics that engages those involved in developing a worldview and faith perspective. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents pointed to the reflection component, coupled with the service, as an opportunity to not only challenge the students philosophically but theologically. Many practitioners created reflection activities and assignments that engaged the students in application of their faith to the course content as well as personal reflection on the relationship between the service, course concepts and their belief system. The various components of service-learning (as seen in the definition) create a rich environment for issues of faith to be nurtured in a course that may not typically be faith-related and therefore generate an even deeper learning opportunity.

A Model for Christian Colleges and Universities

Based upon the scope of the results, eight guidelines were identified that form a model intended to aid in the development of a service-learning program or for use in evaluating an existing program. Many of the guidelines in the model coincide with the five key elements of "best practices" outlined previously, but provide them in a context for overall service-learning program effectiveness. Each guideline in the model builds upon the previous; however, if colleges are already engaged in service-learning the model can be used to assess current practices or in accordance to the specific needs of a campus. Further, the guidelines are meant to address both the philosophical and practical implications in designing an effective service-learning course and program. Each guideline is based upon research and proven effectiveness with consideration given to the distinct mission and purpose of Christian higher education. As a result, the following eight guidelines are recommended as a model for designing an effective service-learning program at a Christian college or university: (a) examine the mission, (b) enlist others, (c) establish a definition, (d) educate and train, (e) develop community partnerships, (f) pilot test, (g) reflect and evaluate, and (h) gain institutional support.

Enlist Others. When starting a service-learning program, solicit the support of others already involved with effective programs. Many of the respondents interviewed said they developed their program by dialoguing with faculty, staff and students who were already a part of a service club, certain majors, or other volunteer organizations on campus. These are people who should be part of the discussion regarding the mission and purpose of the institution. Once these partnerships begin to develop, recruit people from this group to serve as an advisory board to assist in fulfilling the subsequent guidelines. This board should also be representative of people who may not be currently involved in service, but may be an untapped resource. The advisory board should include faculty from each of the academic divisions, students, and key staff and community members who can provide visibility of the effectiveness of the service-learning program while offering valuable insight and feedback.

Establishing a Definition. A mutually-agreed upon definition of service-learning serves to educate, clarify and communicate the components of an effective service-learning course. Further, a definition will provide the outline for strategic planning and program assessment. Therefore, it is crucial that a definition is established that represents sound principles for designing an effective service-learning program as opposed to just another service opportunity. It should also embody the mission and unique purpose of the institution and therefore may not be exactly the same as the definition at another institution.

The first challenge is to determine what definition a college or university will use. Guidelines must then be developed to ensure correct and consistent implementation of service-learning throughout the institution. This is where an advisory board, even in its initial stages of formation, can be of greatest assistance. The advisory board can revisit previous conversations regarding the mission, adopt a definition and establish written guidelines for

the community are involved in the process at two levels: identifying the need for services and designing appropriate service activities. To do this, partnerships need to be developed with people in the community. This can be achieved by enlisting the assistance of those on the advisory board who already have relationships in the community. For example, if the volunteer center already works with several social service organizations, ask for the names of the individuals at those service locations and make initial contacts. These people will already know the college or university, its mission, and hopefully will have had a positive relationship with the students. If they do not have appropriate service needs, they can provide other contacts.

The community partners should also be educated and trained regarding what service-