David Hartman and Gail Rola

Going Global with Service Learning

Service learning programs have demonstrated effectiveness in helping today's students develop essential levels of understanding about self-awareness, citizenship, the environment, diversity and leadership. International service learning extends the learning experience to other cultures, providing opportunities for language development and cross-cultural communication skills, as well as the realization that the world is an interdependent system. The design and outcomes of successful international service learning programs are presented.

As we write this article, the Lieutenant Governor in our home state of Texas is assembling a special commission on twenty-first century colleges and universities. According to the Lieutenant Governor's press release:

> The commission will examine the workforce needs and demographic changes facing Texas in the coming years, and focus on ways to prepare and enhance the higher education system, focusing on such issues as the accessibility and affordability of a college degree in Texas; the role of advanced technology in facilitating learning and preparing students for the jobs of the future; and the appropriate role and mission of higher education in meeting the state's needs on a long-term basis (Perry, 1999).

Political and philosophical dialogue about the future of higher education is being or has been conducted in many states across the country and at the federal level as well. As virtually every effort to improve starts as a response to a perceived problem, speculation poses the obvious question: What's wrong with higher education? But, perhaps a more useful question is: How does higher education need to change in order to better meet constituent expectations?

A Call For Educational Renewal

R. Eugene Rice, director of the Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards for the American Association for Higher Education, suggests that while American colleges and universities have been portrayed as remarkable

success stories for most of the latter half of the twentieth century, recent public criticism has turned increasingly toward higher education. He states, "Particularly biting is the charge that American colleges and universities have become disconnected from the larger purposes of the society" (Rice, 1991, p. 8).

There are also educators concerned about the movement toward private materialism among young adults that started in 1970 and intensified throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Advocates of reform argue that unless this preoccupation with self is halted, the integrity of undergraduate education, or democracy itself, could be in jeopardy.

A Call for Civic Renewal

The solution that many advocate to offset this preoccupation with self is civic education. According to Myers-Lipton (1994), Mark Curtis, president of the Association of American Colleges, believes that the main purpose of higher education should be the advancement of civic learning, while Richard Lyman, president emeritus of Stanford University, claims that the great challenge for the American university is to change "egocentric, pleasure-seeking, and upwardly mobile students into models of Jeffersonian civic-mindedness" (p. 10). There appears to be a widespread perception among critics that in the modern world most students, as well as institutions themselves, see universities as places that primarily socialize young people for careers that provide personal gain but fail to prepare students to work for the public good. Although most universities continue to see themselves as educating the whole person, many of our methods for doing so are rooted in strategies that are carried over from the nineteenth century. Higher education must explore alternative educational strategies and modernize so that it is consistent with today's learning needs.

Early on, Derek Bok (1982) described the changing social responsibilities of higher education and proposed that universities shift the locus of learning and research from the campus into the community. Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence (1998) identify "bases for change" needed to remain relevant and viable in the next decade as external pressures, global integration, changing demographics, and increased diversity and learning styles become more prevalent. The traditional model of excellence, the research university, must give way to multiple models with practical and applied functions if higher education is to meet the diverse learning requirements of its future constituency.

Learning through Service

How do we address the need for educational and civic renewal? Is there a systemic solution that responds to both needs? Many educators believe an effective response to both societal needs lies at the heart of service learning.

There is a growing movement in higher education today that presents, according to Rice, a new perspective, "a different reality that affirms higher education's fundamental connectedness to community and society: service learning" (In Zlotkowski, 1998, p. xi).

In an October, 1998, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* opinion piece titled, "The Path to a Civil Society Goes through the University," William Damon writes that

"beneath the surface of news reports that feature eye-catching academic controversies, [there are] a growing number of initiatives dedicated to preparing students for citizenship in democratic society. Perhaps the best known are programs that send students out to help disadvantaged members of their communities or otherwise contribute to the public good—service learning programs" (p. B12).

Service Learning: A Comprehensive Definition

Bringle and Hatcher (1996) define service learning as "a credit bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service learning is a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to the course material through reflection activities such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations. Unlike practica and internships, the experiential activity in a service learning course is not necessarily skill-based within the context of professional education" (p. 221).

Service learning programs have also been shown to have a significant effect on students' understanding of course content, the attitudes of students and faculty, support for community projects, and an increase in student and faculty volunteerism (Seifer, 1998).

Service Learning in the Global Community

There is a growing realization that the world is an interdependent system. This realization is the result of the globalization of the market place and the global nature of our social and environmental problems (Myers-Lipton, 1994). The impact of the globalization of the market place has forced American business and universities to reconsider the type of skills needed for a productive workforce. Crouse and Wood (1990) suggest that if the United States is to compete economically in the global market, as well as provide moral leadership in an interdependent world, it can no longer produce college graduates who respond to world events with ethnocentric biases, insufficient information, and a general lack of interest in world events. Undergraduates now must possess language and cross-cultural communication skills, as well as be culturally sensitive. They state:

> We must recognize that our students are citizens of the world. Geographic and demographic isolation are no longer (if they ever were) valid reasons for a parochial attitude. Our graduates need an international perspective to understand how rural America is influenced by international issues, especially trade of agricultural products, and they need to develop a respect for cultural diversity and global concerns which they will inevitably find in their respective new communities (p. 23).

Beyond the desire to perpetuate economic growth, many educators cite a more humanitarian—and communitarian—approach to international education. The global nature of our social and environmental problems has made people more aware of the interdependent nature of our world. "The problems we face today: deforestation, ethnic diversity, ozone depletion, increasing economic and social stratification, the greenhouse effect, the Third World loan crisis, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, are all transnational problems. These issues cannot be solved by any one nation, but rather by nongovernmental and governmental organizations from around the world working together in concert" (Myers-Lipton, 1994, p. 39).

Richardson (1996) argues that higher education has a new calling, "a commitment to make a difference in the lives of people where they live," to "play a central role in finding their own solutions," and "to impact public policy that creates economic and social opportunities for people to improve their quality of life."

At a time when the concept of community extends beyond state and national boundaries, it becomes imperative for all world citizens to collaborate on problem-solving and supporting self-sufficiency among autonomous units. When the quality of life is improved in one country, other parts of the world benefit. Unfortunately, many college students have a meager knowledge and understanding of the global village and even less knowledge of how they fit into it and navigate it. Boyer (1987) found "a disturbing lack of knowledge and even at times a climate of indifference about our world." In addition, he discovered that "while some students have a global perspective, the vast majority, although vaguely concerned, are inadequately informed about the interdependent world in which they live" (p. 281).

This lack of global perspective among college students has challenged educators to assume a greater role in teaching about the international arena. American universities have been urged to take a more active role in the students' development of a global perspective (Tonkin, 1993). Some higher education professionals have responded, in part, by creating service learning programs with an international focus. "Advocates believe that service learning, especially when performed in a cross-cultural setting, encourages students to have a greater appreciation of different cultural traditions and makes them more aware of the problems facing other parts of the world" (Myers-Lipton, 1996, p. 659).

Service Learning and International Understanding

Research has suggested that service participation is positively associated with a number of short-term cognitive and affective outcomes during the undergraduate years (Astin and Sax, 1998). In addition, studies demonstrate that service participation positively affects students' commitment to communities, to helping others in difficulty, to promoting racial understanding, and to influencing social values. Service participation also influences the development of important life skills, such as leadership ability, social self-confidence, critical thinking skills, and conflict resolution skills, and has

positive effects on academic development, including knowledge gained, grades earned, degrees sought, and time devoted to academic endeavors (Astin, 1975, 1984, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

Myers-Lipton (1996) found no research that examines the effect of service learning on international understanding. Rather, research completed on international understanding has focused on the study abroad experience and the Semester at Sea program, both of which are college-based. Myers-Lipton concludes that "many of the studies conducted on study abroad have employed weak methodology and have shown limited results" (p. 660). Additionally, in a more contemporary study, Marion (1974) reports that study abroad does not increase students' levels of international understanding and open-mindedness. She concluded that students' impressions may become more realistic, but they do not necessarily become more positive.

Before the 1996 Myers-Lipton study, the first to research service learning and international understanding, the most comprehensive study on international educational programs was conducted by Carlson (Carlson and Luce, 1990). Carlson demonstrated that students who participate in study abroad programs do not report a greater score on the International Understanding Scale than students who stay on their home campuses. The Myers-Lipton study, however, went beyond passive learning programs, measuring attitudes of college students assigned to three groups: 1) students with no service learning as part of the curriculum; 2) students with volunteer service that was not related to the curriculum; and 3) students with service learning that was tied to the curriculum.

Myers-Lipton's (1994) hypothesis was that service learning (as defined earlier) students would show larger increases in international understanding than the other two groups of students. The results supported this hypothesis. The changes between the experimental and control groups were moderate to strong for global concern and cultural respect, and negligible for cultural interest. Service learning students showed a greater increase in civic responsibility than the other groups and had moderate to strong decreases in racial prejudice.

Myers-Lipton's research showed that universities can be agencies of social change if they adopt curricula and pedagogy that allow students to integrate theory and action. In addition, the results "demonstrated that humans are active agents of change because they can create new interpretations of social reality" (p. 218). The study also found that the effect of service learning intensifies when it is experienced for longer periods of time. This suggests that multiple experiences produce dramatically more impressive results. Additionally, students who are involved "in the process of social change and [are] require[d] to participate in the organizational structure of the service providers can bring about substantial attitude change" (p. 218).

The Impact of Service Learning in a Community

Service learning programs embody two primary missions: to meet community needs and to provide meaningful learning experiences for students. Research on service learning

typically focuses on effects related to student learning and pedagogical issues, with the community voice rarely heard (Vernon and Ward, 1999). If service learning activities truly reflect both service and learning, research must include both campus and community perspectives. Practically no research to determine the impact of service learning in a community has been conducted. In our survey of the literature, we found no data on the perception and effect of service learning in the international arena, which is the focus of this article.

While Vernon and Ward (1999) report that community agencies in the United States cite primarily positive experiences with service learning students, these findings can not be generalized globally. Considering the nuances and complexities of cross-cultural exchanges, it would be ill-advised to apply conclusions drawn from a more homogeneous population. The need exists for well-constructed research design in the area of international service learning, and we recommend that research components be systemically integrated with new and existing programs.

Developing International Service Learning

In addition to the research component, the development of successful and effective international service learning programs requires care and prudence. A myriad of problems, which will only be mentioned briefly here but will be explored in greater depth in succeeding articles, can occur in the development of international service learning opportunities.

The following checklist is provided to assist, as they begin planning, those interested in developing service learning abroad:

- Primary care must be taken in the selection of sites to ensure that travel and accommodations are affordable for the type of student at your university.
- Decisions must be made about whether home stay with families is preferred and, if not, what the alternatives are.
- Contact must be made in person with local partners to assist in logistical and program planning. Service learning cannot work if there is not a strong buy-in by the local community.
- Consideration must be given to the need for health insurance and for other issues related to liability and safety.
- Care must be given to frequent communication with the international partners, which may include local universities, nongovernmental organizations, or local governments or agencies.
- Unusually careful course planning must be developed well in advance. There is usually the need for student workbooks to assist the student in preparing because service learning, especially in an international context, often lacks the structure many students expect.

- Special care must be taken to inform the locals about ways in which students may be different from what they are accustomed to, and that there is the need for some level of tolerance.
- It is even more important, however, to make certain that students are aware of local expectations and are well-grounded in basic field ethics, etiquette, and common courtesies in the host region.
- Consideration must also be given to such basics as: Is experience in the language of the region is a prerequisite? Are there other course prerequisites? Are students psychologically and culturally prepared for the experience? Do all students possess the maturity to be part of the experience?

If these and other precautions are taken in the planning and implementation process, faculty, students, and your hosts will all benefit. These include:

- An educational experience in which students are able to integrate the classroom experience with the real world.
- A greater understanding of differences and similarities among peoples with different life experiences.
- An understanding of civic involvement that transcends local boundaries and contributes to understanding and a sense of civic responsibility that can continue through life.
- A better understanding of themselves as students encounter problem solving in a new and sometimes exotic environment.
- A revitalized and active class when students return to their local campus.

Conclusions

The University of North Texas has been conducting service learning experiences in international settings for more than six years. Because of many factors, these experiences have all been in Mexico. However, they have involved many faculty, a wide variety of locations (including Ciudad Guzman, Guadalajara, Cancun, Chetumal, Xalapa, Mazamitla, and Puerta Vallarta), and a variety of content foci.

Based on our experience with international service learning, the results are outstanding. Students are often transformed as individuals and re-evaluate themselves as persons. In our experience, often they enter second language courses, enroll in additional service learning and international experiences, continue contact with their host families and their colleagues. Some change their career focus, and all become more informed, caring, and affirmed students. We do not know whether these changes continue throughout a lifetime, but the short-term changes are all positive. We also continue to have excellent relations with our host locations.

Our experience suggests, as do the studies noted above, that service learning, especially in an international context, has probable consequences for learning theory, methods,

future research, and public policy. We will learn much more through the use of controlled research, but the anecdotal evidence is clear; service learning enhances classroom learning, it provides an opportunity for students to develop intellectually and personally, and it often provides a learning experience for our hosts.

As governing bodies around the nation assemble to debate the future of higher education, as they are here in Texas, and as faculty and students strive to find better ways of teaching and learning, the local and global community would benefit from further exploration and investment in service learning programs at both domestic and international sites.

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