

## **Key Influences on the Long-Term Sustainability of Service-Learning in Higher Education**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*As service-learning is adopted by growing numbers of higher education institutions, community partners, and students, there is increasing interest in understanding what factors are necessary to support long-term sustainability. The authors of this article interviewed individuals from a cohort of sixteen schools that were early adopters of service-learning, to learn more about what factors influenced the sustainability of service-learning, as facilitators, challenges, and strategies for success. This article summarizes the methods and findings from their study, and provides links to webpages where you can read more detailed descriptions, access their interview guide, and read about related prior research. For a full-length scholarly article about this research, see the Fall 2010 issue of the Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, there have been increasing investments in service-learning by academic institutions, community partners, and funding agencies. With these increasing investments, there is a growing focus on how to plan for the long-term sustainability of new and ongoing service-learning initiatives. Common sense tells us that sustainability is important to the efficiency and impact of service-learning. For example, sustainability ensures that front-loaded investments by academic institutions, community partners, and funders are not lost or unnecessarily replicated. These investments include developing community-academic partnerships, incorporating service-learning into the curriculum, and training faculty and staff in skills for service-learning.

Sustainability is also critically important to the quality and impact of service-learning. Continuity in service-learning partnerships is an important ingredient in maintaining the trust that is essential to community partners' willingness to allow students and faculty to engage with their staff members, clients, and broader community (Shediak-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998). In addition, active long-term partnerships may be required to achieve some of the most ambitious goals of

service-learning, such as shifting the culture of an academic institution toward greater civic engagement; enhancing mutual understanding among an academic institution and participating communities; building the capacity of academic and community partners to address community needs; and generating community-engaged scholarship by faculty members (Cashman & Seifer, 2008; Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2007; Gelmon, Holland, & Shinnamon, 1998; Freyder & O’Toole, 2000; Seifer, 1998).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior research on the factors that influence the sustainability of service-learning in higher education has identified many important influencing factors. We see these factors as falling into three broad categories:

- (1) ***Institutional characteristics and policies***, such as the centrality of service or civic engagement to an institution’s mission (Gelmon, Holland, & Shinnamon, 1998; Holland, 1997) and recognition for service-learning and engaged scholarship in faculty promotion, tenure, and hiring policies (Furco, 2001; Holland, 1997; Prentice, 2002);
- (2) ***Resources and infrastructure to support service-learning***, including institutional funding for service-learning, a coordinating center in a central organizational location, and professional development opportunities and incentives to support faculty involvement (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000; Furco, 2001; Furco, 2002; Gelmon & Agre-Kippenhan, 2002; Gelmon, Holland, & Shinnamon, 1998; Holland, 1997; Young, Shinnar, Ackerman, Carruthers, et al, 2007); and
- (3) ***Strategic activities***, including strategic planning for institutionalization, clear articulation of how service-learning helps to advance broader institutional initiatives and priorities, and vocal support for service-learning among high-level academic administrators and faculty members (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000; Furco, 2001; Prentice, 2002).

## RATIONALE FOR THE CURRENT RESEARCH

Most of the published research on the sustainability of service-learning is limited to examining sustainability within a three-to-five year period. Yet, as Furco (2002) points out, true institutionalization of service-learning may take five to ten years to occur. We wanted to learn more about what factors influence the long-term sustainability of service-learning – for example, for a decade or longer. To answer this question, we turned to a cohort of schools that had participated in a demonstration program for service-learning, from 1995 to 1998. In 2008-2010, we interviewed 23 individuals from 16 of these schools, to learn what factors had influenced the long-term sustainability of service-learning, as facilitators, challenges, or strategies for success.

## METHODS

We contacted the cohort of schools that had participated in the Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN) program, a US-based national demonstration program to implement service-learning in health professions education.<sup>1</sup> From 1995 to 1998, HPSISN provided financial and technical support to 17 health professions schools to integrate service-learning into their curricula. These schools reflected the diversity of United States higher

education institutions. They included public and private, research-intensive and teaching-oriented, faith-based and secular, and rural and urban institutions.<sup>2</sup>

In 2007, after obtaining research ethics approval, we contacted the principal investigators (PIs) from the 17 schools, to explain our research goals and invite their participation in one-on-one telephone interviews.<sup>3</sup> Sixteen agreed to participate, and interviews were conducted in 2007 and 2008. We used a semi-structured in-depth interview guide to explore the extent to which each participating school had sustained service-learning in health professions education since HPSISN grant funding ended, and to learn about the variety of factors that influenced the long-term sustainability of their service-learning activities.

In order to answer all of our research questions about each school, we sometimes needed to contact additional individuals. We used snowball sampling, in which interview participants recommend additional participants, as needed, to achieve this goal. In total, we interviewed 23 individuals from 16 of the HPSISN schools. They included service-learning directors, faculty members, department chairs and deans.

All interview participants agreed to have their interviews recorded, and all but one agreed to have his or her interview transcribed. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding and memo-writing (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse & Richards, 2002). To analyze the interview that was not transcribed, the lead investigator listened to the recording and took notes on the major themes that emerged. These notes were analyzed along with the transcripts.

## **RELATED RESOURCES --**

For a more detailed description of the study methods, please see Dr. Vogel's doctoral dissertation. The interview guide used in this research is available in Appendix D of the dissertation.

Vogel, A.L. Advancing service-learning in health professions education: Maximizing sustainability, quality and co-leadership. A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 2009. <http://bit.ly/lzB9Kg>

## **RESULTS**

### ***Degree of Sustainability***

We first explored the degree to which the 16 represented schools had sustained service-learning. We found that four distinct levels of sustainability emerged: none, low, moderate, or high. Four features distinguished among these levels. They were: (1) whether service-learning was integrated into the curriculum or not; (2) the extent of institutional resources provided to support service-learning activities; (3) the location of these resources -- at the level of the course, department, school, or university; and (4) the presence of institutional policies that supported service-learning. The characteristics of these four levels of sustainability are described in Table 1, below.

Table 1: *Four Levels of Sustainability*

<b>Level of Sustainability</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<p><b>None (1 school)</b></p> <p>Service-learning was not sustained in any way.</p>	<p>Service-learning was not sustained in any way, in co-curricular experiences, elective courses, or required courses.</p>
<p><b>Low (3 schools)</b></p> <p>Service-learning continued in some form, but was not a stable and regular activity, and was not supported in a systematic way.</p>	<p>Service-learning was included only in a co-curricular experience or elective course. It was maintained only through the independent efforts of a small number of faculty members.</p> <p>Service-learning received no additional support in the form of rhetoric, resources, or infrastructure at the level of the department, school, college, or university. All 3 schools had a strong institution-wide focus on other specialized teaching methods.</p>
<p><b>Moderate (5 schools)</b></p> <p>Service-learning was a stable and regular activity, was integrated into institutional routines, and was supported by the investment of related resources. It may also have been supported by institutional values.</p>	<p>Service-learning was integrated into required courses. At two of these schools, service-learning was coordinated at the level of the course, by a faculty member or full-time service-learning director. At three of these schools, service-learning was coordinated at the level of the department, by a faculty member or full-time service-learning director.</p> <p>This involved related investments such as departmental planning processes, faculty time, and development of learning objectives for service-learning. At four of these schools, the institutional mission provided support for service-learning, and at three, high-level administrators were supportive of service-learning.</p>
<p><b>High (7 schools)</b></p> <p>Service-learning was a stable and regular activity, and was integrated into institutional routines. It was supported by the investment of related resources and by institutional values, as reflected in infrastructure and policies.</p>	<p>Service-learning was integrated into required courses, and centrally coordinated through a service-learning director and center at the level of the school or college. Five of these schools also had a service-learning or civic engagement center at the level of the university that provided additional support for service-learning in health professions education.</p> <p>All of these schools provided dedicated internal funding for a service-learning director and funding or release time for faculty to participate. At six of these schools, the institutional mission provided support for service-learning, and at another six, high-level administrators were supportive of service-learning.</p> <p>A sub-group of these schools had additional sources of institutional support for service-learning. At four, a steering committee advised service-learning in health professions education. At three of these four, hiring, promotion, and tenure policies recognized faculty participation in service-learning.</p>

## *Facilitators, Challenges, and Strategies for Success*

Participants described the key factors that supported or hindered the sustainability of service-learning at their schools in the ten years since the HPSISN program ended. These factors were typically complementary, for example, the presence of strong leadership for service-learning was identified as supportive of sustainability, while a leadership vacuum was identified as a challenge. Seven main facilitating factors and three main challenges to sustainability emerged from the 23 interviews, as summarized below in Table 2.

An important finding was that participants from schools at each of the levels of sustainability reported the presence of challenges to sustainability. But a factor that differentiated the schools that had high and low levels of sustainability was if and how they were able to respond to these challenges. Participants from the high sustainability schools described four key strategies for success used at their schools to address these challenges. These are also summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: *Facilitating Factors, Challenges, and Strategies for Success*

<i>Facilitating Factors in the Institutional Environment</i>	<b>A supportive institutional culture</b> , such as a mission statement that supports institutional service or a valued history of partnership with the local community.
	<b>Supportive high-level administrators</b> , through vocal advocacy for community engagement or support for faculty champions for service-learning.
	<b>A “critical mass” of support</b> for service-learning among all members of the institution, including administrators, faculty, and students.
<i>Facilitating Factors in the Design and Implementation of Service-Learning</i>	<b>Integration of service-learning into the curriculum</b> , preferably within required courses.
	<b>Infrastructure and resources to support participation in service-learning</b> , such as a coordination center for service-learning and incentives and recognition for faculty participants.
	<b>Appointment of a service-learning director who is a strong leader for service-learning at the institution</b> , for example, someone who is able to bring attention and resources to service-learning and cultivate a critical mass of support.
	<b>Investing in creating stable, long-term community-academic partnerships</b> by implementing partnership principles, committing to long-term partnerships, and engaging community partners who are equally committed to long-term partnerships.
<i>Challenges</i>	<b>Turnover among faculty members using service-learning in their teaching</b> , which may threaten the quality or continuity of service-learning in the curriculum.
	<b>Turnover among champions for service-learning among high-level administrators and highly-regarded faculty members</b> , which may lead to the reduction or elimination of service-learning opportunities.
	<b>Competing educational priorities</b> , which could lead to the reduction or elimination of service-learning opportunities, and/or create disincentives for faculty and student participation in service-learning.

<i>Strategies for Success</i>	<b>Providing ongoing opportunities for faculty professional development in service-learning</b> , such as training seminars and individualized technical assistance.
	<b>Articulating how service-learning contributes to both established and emerging educational objectives</b> , and adapting service-learning to emerging educational objectives.
	<b>Articulating how service-learning contributes to a wide range of institutional goals</b> , such as the success of high-profile educational and research initiatives, improvements in “town-gown” relations, and student recruitment.
	<b>Engaging in “internal marketing” to publicize the value of service-learning</b> to educational objectives and broader institutional goals, through university news outlets, external local media, one-on-one communication with key decision makers, formal evaluations of service-learning, and campus events.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A potential limitation on our knowledge about the factors influencing the sustainability service-learning in higher education is that most published studies on the topic have been funded concurrent with three- to five-year grants to implement or institutionalize service-learning. Yet actual institutionalization may take five to ten years to achieve. This research benefitted from a retrospective study design that explored influences on sustainability over a ten-year period of time. The cohort of schools that we studied was also ideal for the exploration of site-specific influencing factors, such as the institutional environment and the way that service-learning was implemented.

Our findings provide guidance for how higher education institutions can plan for the sustainability of service-learning, including the institutional conditions they can foster, key aspects of how to design and implement service-learning activities, and strategies for addressing the challenges to sustainability that will invariably arise. These findings echo the existing literature, in particular by emphasizing the important influence of the institutional culture on the sustainability of service-learning, and the effectiveness of strategic activities to create value for service-learning, even in the face of challenges. Our findings reinforce previous authors (see Furco, 2001; Furco and Holland, 2003) who identify how using service-learning to achieve valued educational objectives and broader institutional goals, and then clearly articulating these connections, are powerful strategies to promote the long-term sustainability of service-learning. Our findings also offer hope to champions for service-learning in academic institutions with institutional cultures that do not provide great support for service-learning. For they identify that the ways that service-learning is designed, implemented, and promoted are also critical to sustainability.

A limitation of our study was that our sample, while diverse in terms of institutional characteristics, was comprised of health professions schools, only. However, our findings about the influences on the sustainability of service-learning may be relevant to higher education more broadly, and particularly to other professional schools, which are similarly affected by the

rapidly evolving expectations of society and the workplace for the skills and competencies that students are expected to attain.

## RELATED RESOURCES –

For the full-length article about this research, please read:

Vogel, A.L., Seifer, S.D., & Gelmon, S.B. (2010). What influences the long-term sustainability of service-learning? Lessons from early adopters. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 17(1): 59-74. <http://bit.ly/luhHOq>

To learn more about the HPSISN program, and the results of the HPSISN evaluation, conducted in 1998 to 1999, go to:

Gelmon, S.B., Holland, B.A., Seifer, S.D., Shinnamon, A.F., & Connors, K. (1998). Community-university partnerships for mutual learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 5, 97-107.  
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=mjcs;cc=mjcs;q1=Gelmon%20Holland%20Seifer%20Shinnamon;rgn=full%20text;view=image;seq=1;idno=3239521.0005.110;didno=3239521.0005.110;page=root;size=100>

Gelmon, S.B., Holland, B.A. & Shinnamon, A.F. (1998). *Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation: 1996-1998 Final Evaluation Report*. San Francisco: UCSF Center for the Health Professions.  
The order form for this report can be found at:  
<http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/guide.html>

Gelmon, S.B., Holland, B.A., Shinnamon, A.F. & Morris, B.A. (1998). Community-based education and service: The HPSISN experience. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 12(3), 257-272.  
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[http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/Abstract/1998/03000/Service\\_learning\\_\\_community\\_campus\\_partnerships.15.aspx](http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/Abstract/1998/03000/Service_learning__community_campus_partnerships.15.aspx)

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Seifer, S.D., Mutha, S., & Connors, K. (1996). Service-learning in health professions education: Barriers, facilitators and strategies for success. In B. Taylor (Ed.),

*Expanding boundaries: Serving and learning* (pp. 36-41). Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service.

<http://www.servicelearning.org/library/resource/3818>

To view the original HPSISN Evaluation (1998) instruments, download the “Methods and Strategies” documents at: <http://bit.ly/mGAXbp>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> HPSISN was a program of the Pew Health Professions Commission and the National Fund for Medical Education, and was supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Corporation for National and Community Service Learn and Serve America Higher Education program, and the Health Resources and Services Administration.

<sup>2</sup> Institutions participating in the HPSISN program from 1995 through 1998 included: George Washington University/George Mason University, Georgetown University, Northeastern University, Ohio University, Regis University, San Francisco State University, University of Connecticut, University of Florida, University of Kentucky, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, University of Pittsburgh, University of Scranton, University of Southern California, University of Utah and University of Utah/Purdue University (2 participating programs), Virginia Commonwealth University, and West Virginia Wesleyan College.

<sup>3</sup> This research was approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board (IRB-1 Protocol #211).

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