

# **AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE TRANSPARENCY OF INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT OF SERVICE LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS**

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*A POSTER PRESENTATION*

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## ***EXTENDED ABSTRACT***

Service learning is increasingly recognized in higher educational settings as a transformative learning method for increasing student engagement in learning experiences, promoting civic responsibility, and exposing students to field settings and potential professional networks. As more institutions devote more classroom time or credit credentialing to the service learning experience, institutions are beginning to grapple with needing to validate this learning experience in quantifiable and qualitative terms in order to describe the experience to stakeholders, including accrediting bodies. This paper presents an investigation into institution-provided, publically available materials regarding assessment of service learning objectives, outcomes, and activities in order to inform stakeholders of emerging trends, changes, and best practices in transparency of service learning outcomes.

While many higher educational institutions tout the number of offered service learning opportunities, variety of settings, and format of experiences, they are more challenged in translating the experience into communicative terms that convey the meaningfulness of the experience as a learning activity. With assessment transparency related with mixed results to stakeholder confidence (Bamber, 2015) and motivation (Seevers, Rowe, & Skinner, 2014); publically presenting valid and reliable data may serve to impact program success and effectiveness evaluation. Despite gains in the quality and quantity of assessment measures for higher education institutions, regional, and national bodies and consortium, improvements in transparency of assessment results are still needed as evidenced by recent announcements by the United States Department of Education to improve and expand researcher access to data, enhance the FSA Data Center, expand use of administrative data, and support evidence-based policymaking (Mahaffie, 2017). Large public institutions tend to funnel all academic activity through departments and not have the effectiveness or assessment infrastructures of the institutional body; nearly one-fourth of the service learning programs in the current investigation were sponsored by an academic sub-unit, college, or department, and an additional one-fourth only had representation from two or three academic areas. A 2016 survey of Association of American College and University (AACU) member institutions found that while 87% assess learning outcomes within departments, only 67% assess learning outcomes in general education across multiple courses (Hart Research Associates, 2016a), where service learning is most likely to be found. As illustrated by this study, service learning is often occurring at the course level, so assessment of service learning may be underreported or under analyzed if not linked to an institutional initiative. Yates, Wilson, and Purton (2015) noted the dearth of studies validating experiential learning experiences and used their literature review to conclude that a range of assessment methods exists in the field.

In order to foster better learning, Association of American College and University (AAC&U) has identified and recommended six learning objective categories related to service learning: 1) Diversity of Communities and Cultures; 2) Analysis of Knowledge; 3) Civic Identity and Commitment; 4) Civic

Communication; 5) Civic Action and Reflection; and 6) Civic Contexts/Structures (Brammer et al., 2009).

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