Sustaining Service Learning: The Role of Chief Academic Officers

by Mary Prentice, Robert Exley, and Gail Robinson

In the fall of 2000, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) received a three-year grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) to create and enhance service learning initiatives at community colleges across the country. Service learning combines community service with academic instruction, focusing on critical, reflective thinking and personal and civic responsibility.

As part of the *Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning* grant, AACC convened the chief academic officers (CAOs) from colleges it had funded between 1994 and 2000, as well as new AACC grantees for 2000–2003. AACC's previous *Horizons* grantees comprised faculty and staff who worked on service learning projects. The 2000-2003 program intentionally included CAOs for the first time to build support for the colleges' project teams, to give voice to the CAO perspective, and to learn how these leaders work to institutionalize programs and decide which programs have merit.

For service learning to become institutionalized, it must be part of the fabric of the college. It should be integrated into the curriculum, supported by faculty, students, and administrators, and enhanced by strong community partnerships.

Up to 23 CAOs met annually at AACC's Summit on Service Learning Institutionalization to learn more about service learning, discuss ways to sustain service learning, and explore with their colleagues the multiple pressures facing a CAO. These academic leaders also examined how to maximize student learning in the face of competing options and tight budgets.

State-imposed budget reductions in 2003 translated into deep cuts across higher education, forcing academic administrators to look hard at all programs, practices, and personnel to assure that each supports student learning. During lean times, administrators often have no alternative but to eliminate costs that do not enhance the core mission of every college—student learning.

Most people who develop new programs or initiatives intend for them to become a permanent part of an institution. Yet well-meaning program directors tend to focus exclusively on developing

> "Service learning is part of every aspect of the campus. Budget cuts can't kill it without hurting the institution as a whole—it's a teaching and learning tool."
>
> **—Leon Richards**
> **Kapi`olani Community College, Hawaii**

and implementing program goals at the expense of tending to the work necessary for long-term institutionalization of the program.

The literature of program sustainability in higher education reveals one sustainability factor that is found repeatedly: the need for the support of the chief academic officer of the college (Hinck and Brandell, 2000; Prentice, 2002; Robinson and Barnett, 1996). Although the support of the CAO is important, little was known about how these CAOs view service learning and how their support might be gained.

Major Themes from CAO Summits

Chief academic officers who participated in AACC's three summits identified an array of factors and circumstances that guide their work in evaluating or supporting service learning. Several themes emerged from their discussions, all of which can lead to long-term sustainability of service learning in community colleges.

- **Support faculty with the tools they need to teach well.** It is critical that administrators find visible ways to recognize and encourage faculty members through professional development, formal reward structures, and personal comments. The *Horizons* CAOs reported positive benefits for service learning faculty such as professional reinvigoration and teaching skill enhancement. In addition, it is not uncommon for a faculty member to provide enthusiastic and effective leadership for his or her peers in the service learning arena.

- **View service learning as an integral part of the curriculum.** Establish ongoing discussions with key faculty leaders involved in the formal curriculum approval process. *Horizons* faculty found that using service learning as a teaching strategy enhanced their ability to communicate—and helped their students to

learn—the core competencies of their subject matter. While faculty are responsible for the development, implementation, and continuous improvement of the college's curriculum, a signature responsibility of a CAO is to support and guide the process for assuring a current and effective curriculum. Service learning provides CAOs with an opportunity to engage in an academic dialogue with faculty in a way that benefits everyone at the institution.

- **Use service learning as a vehicle.** Not only can it enhance student learning of academic content, but it can build on other college goals such as increasing students' awareness and value of diversity, multicultural environments, civic responsibility, and community needs. The CAO plays a pivotal role in keeping these issues in the forefront of the daily workings of an institution.

- **Build faculty awareness of different teaching methodologies.** Routinely distribute information on service learning and other types of experiential or nontraditional classroom learning. One example is monthly CAO-faculty dialogues over the course of an academic year to explore new options for teaching and learning. Dialogues can provide an informal means for each participant's educational philosophy to be discussed within the context of the community college mission. Sessions may include faculty members sharing success stories that relate to teaching methodologies and strategies.

- **Ask faculty to include service learning in syllabi and learning objectives.** Ensure that a number of model syllabi or course outlines are available for distribution. A faculty handbook provides an excellent opportunity to list and demonstrate a variety of teaching strategies like service learning. In addition, a faculty handbook can list the general learning goals for the institution and definitions of teaching

methods that can assist in achieving these goals. The CAO, in partnership with senior faculty members, provides the leadership necessary to keep the academic anchor of service learning clearly stated for faculty members.

- **Hire faculty with experience in community service and/or service learning.** Review existing hiring practices and job descriptions to assure the inclusion of service learning experience and expectations. As veteran faculty retire, seek to replace them with faculty who are willing to teach with service learning and who are comfortable with diverse groups of learners.

- **Include service learning in the college's internal educational goals.** Review the strategic plan and mission statement to assure that service learning is one natural means for achieving long-range goals.

- **Integrate service learning into the college culture.** Include it in new employee and student orientation, professional development activities, internal and external grants, accountability measures, and promotion and tenure guidelines.

- **Convene stakeholders to use a rubric for assessing stages of institutionalization.** Each participating *Horizons* college formed a team of campus and community stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, administrators, agency partners) to review the progress and status of their service learning initiatives. The CAOs overwhelmingly agreed that an institutionalization rubric (Furco, in press) was an effective tool for providing daily and long-range direction.

- **Network with other colleges.** Take advantage of numerous resources on service learning to reach out to other institutions of higher education in the vicinity. Multiple colleges can share professional development venues and community partner placements.

- **Connect with community organizations and partners.** Visualize and include community organizations as full players in the work of the college. CAOs can serve on community organizations' boards, acting as conduits for information and service opportunities for the colleges and the agencies.

- **Partner with K-12 schools to foster a continuum of service learning.** Many states include some form of service learning at the K-12 levels. Many high school students familiar with service learning look for similar opportunities in college and are ripe for recruitment.

- **Focus on service learning as a means to address civic responsibility and public policy.** Explore ways to engage students, faculty, administrators, and local leaders in ongoing dialogues as a means for continually improving communities. Use a variety of methods to integrate civic responsibility into the curriculum (Gottlieb and Robinson, 2002).

> "If service learning is an add-on, it loses effectiveness. It should be in the syllabus as an integral part of the course. We tell students 'you are here to learn' and service learning is one way you can learn."
>
> **—Jeffrey Lukenbill**
> **Miami-Dade College, Florida**

These themes demonstrate the importance of the CAO's commitment to supporting the college's primary mission of enhancing student learning. As the CAOs at AACC's three summits discovered, service learning touches almost every aspect of most community college mission statements—suggesting that

service learning supports a community college's reason for being.

Horizons CAOs found that service learning augments student learning, enriches teaching, and energizes faculty. These three benefits could certainly be enough to support institutionalizing service learning, but the CAOs saw service learning as also providing a fourth benefit: engaging students in their civic responsibility as community members. Service learning offers more than an avenue for students to learn the academic content of courses. It goes beyond the classroom to provide opportunities for students to see themselves as part of a community that needs their talents and skills. As the *Horizons* CAOs learned, service learning is a good way to meet most colleges' missions of providing service to their communities while simultaneously enhancing student learning.

Structural Models to Support Service Learning

While service learning is a valuable academic tool that can be adopted by any college, the way in which it is structured and administered should reflect the culture of the institution. Several possibilities exist for housing and running a service learning program, some of which are described below.

Comprehensive Support Model

A *comprehensive support model* includes a designated physical space and resources for a service learning center. This model makes it easy to visualize "the center" and lends concrete visibility for service learning. A center may or may not include staff members (such as a service learning director or coordinator) to manage faculty and student efforts. Many colleges that do have a center provide training for faculty members as well as community partners, and have an operational budget to support such efforts. *Horizons* project examples of this model can be found at Albuquerque TVI Community College, NM; Anne Arundel

Community College, MD; Gadsden State Community College, AL; Glendale Community College, CA; and Miami-Dade College, FL.

Teaching/Learning Center Model

A *teaching/learning center model* involves the integration of service learning support within an existing, budgeted professional development center on campus. This model may or may not require separate space or staff. Service learning training and pedagogical support are part of a larger faculty development and/or community outreach office. The institution identifies faculty members to serve as liaisons and consultants to direct the work and support their peers through (1) ongoing professional development opportunities, (2) direct emphasis on professional responsibilities—service learning is a pedagogical tool and as such the faculty member learns how to teach with service learning—and (3) a culture of service throughout the institution. It is common practice at many institutions for faculty who use service learning to be actively engaged in service of their own. This service mindset can create an atmosphere where service is readily supported in the classroom and across the institution. Examples of this model appear at Johnson County Community College, KS, and Southern Maine Community College, ME.

Internal Consortium Model

An *internal consortium model* relies on the establishment of an internal, faculty-led group of liaisons from various academic and student services departments throughout the institution. The group may meet on a regular basis or an informal, as-needed basis. The critical work of the group is to provide direction and accountability for service learning activities and training. This group establishes guidelines for peers regarding academic rigor and curricular integrity, and serves as mentors for one another. The funding for operational support may be threaded within the represented departments, thus the support of mid-managers (deans or chairs) is critical for this model to succeed. This model

includes no distinct center, staffing, or budget. Examples of this model can be found at Bellevue Community College, WA; Iowa Western Community College, IA; and Oakton Community College, IL.

Discipline/Department-Based Model

A *discipline- or department-based model* is characterized by the visible "hosting" of the service learning initiative within a specific academic department. The department or discipline provides the key active support and leadership, often through the dean or chair. It utilizes one or more identified academic departments as the source for coordination of activities, and departmental budgets are the primary source of funding. Examples of this model can be found at Dona Ana Branch Community College, NM, and Orange Coast College, CA.

Service Learning in Accreditation

Regardless of structure, the outcomes of service learning participation can help a college meet its accreditation goals. Accreditation standards are beginning to reflect and recognize the value inherent in new learning modalities such as service learning or distance learning. Service learning facilitates students' learning of course content, exposes them to broader social issues, and educates them about their civic responsibility. It provides faculty development opportunities and support for innovative teaching approaches. In these ways and more, service learning can serve as a vehicle for colleges to use in meeting accreditation requirements.

Three examples of how service learning can be used in meeting regional accreditation standards can be found in guidelines from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the New England Association of School and Colleges (NEASC), and the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western

Association of Schools and Colleges (ACCJC).

The Higher Learning Commission's accreditation guidelines include the need for documentation of "programs that include courses and/or activities whose purpose is to stimulate the examination and understanding of personal, social, and civic values" (*http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/overview/*, accessed 8 July 2003).

> "We've infused the curriculum with technology—why haven't we given that same kind of attention to service learning?"
>
> **—Nancy Johnson**
> **Prestonsburg Community College, Kentucky**

The commission recently outlined new criteria to be implemented in January 2005. Two of the five basic criteria use language and suggest as evidence topics and concepts that naturally fit within the scope of service learning. One addresses the "acquisition, discovery, and application of knowledge" as follows: "The organization promotes a life of learning for its faculty, administration, staff, and students by fostering and supporting inquiry, creativity, practice, and social responsibility in ways consistent with its mission." The "examples of evidence" state, "The organization demonstrates the linkages between curricular and co-curricular activities that support inquiry, practice, creativity, and social responsibility."

Another criterion, on engagement and service, can be met even more directly with service learning as evidenced by its criterion statement ("as called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value") and examples of evidence ("planning processes project ongoing engagement and service" and "outreach programs respond to identified community needs").

NEASC asks for evidence that "the institution endeavors to enhance the quality of teaching.

It encourages experimentation with methods to improve instruction. Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program . . . demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind" (*http://www.neasc.org/cihe/stancihe.htm*, accessed 7 July 2003).

ACCJC revised its accreditation standards in 2002 to reflect the increasing emphasis on education as broadly defined and including social awareness and civic responsibility—terms that are also inherent in service learning. The introduction to the instructional program guidelines states, "The institution uses delivery modes and teaching methodologies that reflect the diverse needs and learning styles of its students." Later in the instructional program standards, the qualities of an ethical human being and an effective citizen are listed as "an appreciation of ethical principles; civility and interpersonal skills; respect for cultural diversity; historical and aesthetic sensitivity; and the willingness to assume civic, political, and social responsibilities locally, nationally, and globally" (*http://www.accjc.org/New_Folder/ACCJC%20Accreditation%20New.pdf*, accessed 10 July 2003).

Good service learning addresses the civic and ethical components desired by these organizations. In an environment where everyone in the college faces multiple demands on their time, using one program to meet many needs is an efficient strategy for ensuring that a college meets its goals.

Summary

After three years of attending the CAO institutionalization summits, what this group of educational administrators valued most was the opportunity to gather with their peers in sustained conversation and discussion about the heart of their work—student learning. The association that these CAOs made between service learning and enhanced student learning may explain why, in the face of the most severe budget cuts many had ever experienced, all affirmed that service learning will be sustained on their campuses. In the end, for the *Horizons* colleges, one of the factors that has been found to lead to program institutionalization—chief academic officer support—was achieved.

References

Furco, Andrew. In press. *Institutionalizing Service-Learning in Higher Education*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

Gottlieb, Karla, and Gail Robinson, eds. 2002. *A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges/Community College Press.

Hinck, Shelly S., and Mary Ellen Brandell. 2000. The Relationship between Institutional Support and Campus Acceptance of Academic Service Learning. *American Behavioral Scientist* 43(5): 868-882.

Prentice, Mary. 2002. *Institutionalizing Service Learning in Community Colleges*. AACC Research Brief. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

Robinson, Gail, and Lynn Barnett. 1996. *Service Learning and Community Colleges: Where We Are*. AACC Survey Report. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

Horizons College CAO Summit Participants 2001-2003

John Walstrum
Vice President for Instruction
Albuquerque TVI Community College
Albuquerque, NM

Andrew Meyer
Vice President for Learning
Anne Arundel Community College
Arnold, MD

Ron Leatherbarrow
Executive Dean
Bellevue Community College
Bellevue, WA

Keith Cotroneo
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Broome Community College
Binghamton, NY

Maria Hesse
Dean of Instruction (2001)
Marybeth Mason
Dean/Special Assistant to the President (2003)
Chandler-Gilbert Community College
Chandler, AZ

Margie Huerta
Campus Instructional Officer
Dona Ana Branch Community College
Las Cruces, NM

Lavinia Sparkman
Vice President for Instruction
East Central Community College
Decatur, MS

Dan Goehring
Vice President for Academic Services
Fergus Falls Community College
Fergus Falls, MN

Jim Jolly
Dean of Instructional Services
Gadsden State Community College
Gadsden, AL

Chris McCarthy
Executive Vice President, Instructional Services
Glendale Community College
Glendale, CA

Robert Exley
Vice President of Academic Affairs
Iowa Western Community College
Council Bluffs, IA

Dan Radakovich
Vice President
Johnson County Community College
Overland Park, KS

Leon Richards
Senior Academic Dean
Kapi`olani Community College
Honolulu, HI

Valerie Perkins
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Malcolm X College
Chicago, IL

Jeffrey Lukenbill
College Provost
Miami-Dade College
Miami, FL

Carol Jeandron
Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
Nunez Community College
Chalmette, LA

Mary Mittler
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Oakton Community College
Des Plaines, IL

Robert Dees
Vice President, Instruction
Orange Coast College
Costa Mesa, CA

Nancy Johnson
Executive Dean of Academic Affairs
Prestonsburg Community College
Prestonsburg, KY

David Canine
Vice President for Student Learning (2002)
Herlinda Coronado
Vice President for Student Learning (2001)
Richland College
Dallas, TX

Janet Sortor
Vice President and Academic Dean (2003)
William Warren
Vice President and Academic Dean (2001, 2002)
Southern Maine Community College
South Portland, ME

Floyd Ogburn
Associate Dean
University College
Cincinnati, OH

Edwin Hardison
Vice President of Instruction and Student Services
Virginia Highlands Community College
Abingdon, VA

This list reflects CAOs' titles and colleges at the time of participation.

Select Electronic Resources

American Association for Higher Education *www.aahe.org/service/*

American Association of Community Colleges *www.aacc.nche.edu/servicelearning*

Campus Compact *www.compact.org*

Campus Outreach Opportunity League *www.cool2serve.org*

Community-Campus Partnerships for Health *www.futurehealth.ucsf.edu/ccph.html*

Community College National Center for Community Engagement *www.mc.maricopa.edu/engagement*

Corporation for National and Community Service *www.nationalservice.org*

Educators for Community Engagement *www.e4ce.org*

Effective Practices Information Center *www.nationalserviceresources.org/epicenter*

International Partnership for Service-Learning *www.ipsl.org*

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse *www.servicelearning.org*

Points of Light Foundation *www.pointsoflight.org*

UCLA Service-Learning Clearinghouse Project *www.gseis.ucla.edu/slc*

About the Authors

Mary Prentice is visiting assistant professor for educational management and development at New Mexico State University. Robert Exley is vice president of academic affairs at Iowa Western Community College. Gail Robinson is coordinator of service learning at the American Association of Community Colleges.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE *HORIZONS* PROJECT, CONTACT:

Gail Robinson
Coordinator of Service Learning
American Association of Community Colleges
One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 410
Washington, DC 20036-1176
Phone: 202/728-0200 ext. 254
Fax: 202/728-2965
E-mail: *grobinson@aacc.nche.edu*
Web: *www.aacc.nche.edu/servicelearning*

TO ORDER MORE COPIES OF THIS *HORIZONS* PROJECT BRIEF, CONTACT:

Community College Press
PO Box 311
Annapolis Junction, MD 20701-0311
Phone: 800/250-6557
Fax: 301/604-0158
E-mail: *aaccpub@pmds.com*
Web: *www.aacc.nche.edu/bookstore*
Order #1551
Briefs are sold in packs of 20 for $20