Abstract

The researchers explored whether implementation of a systematic outcomes-based assessment process is necessary for demonstrating quality in service learning programs at a two-year and a four-year institution. The findings revealed that Western Community College and the University of the Coast maintained quality service-learning programs, which met their established learning goals and reflected the community's needs, by incorporating numerous components of a systematic outcomes-based assessment process, even though this process had not been established.

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CAN INSTITUTIONS HAVE QUALITY PROGRAMMING WITHOUT UTILIZING A SYSTEMATIC OUTCOMES-BASED ASSESSMENT PROCESS?

For many students, service learning not only expands their educational horizons, but also makes them more aware and compassionate of those who live in communities very different from their own. Yet, despite the expressed benefits of service learning and the increasing numbers of institutions offering service-learning programs, it is not known whether they are truly successful unless evidence of their success is provided. The use of outcomes-based assessment is one of the processes that generates evidence of program effectiveness. While scholars have written about the ways in which effective outcomes-based assessment must be implemented (Bresciani, 2006; Bresciani, Moore-Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Maki, 2004; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Suskie, 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), few studies have been performed to identify whether all the components of effective outcomes-based assessment must be present in order for quality programs to be identified. Thus, the purpose of this cross-case comparative study was to find out whether implementation of a systematic outcomes-based assessment system is necessary for demonstrating quality in service learning at a community college and a private four-year institution.

Review of Literature

Bresciani (2006) noted that outcomes-based assessment provides vital information to enhance learning through "systematic evaluation of student learning and development" (p. 1). In addition, according to Bresciani et al. (2009), "Outcomes-based assessment is intended to inform decision-making processes"(p. 14) and "goes one step beyond typical evaluation" (p. 16). Bresciani noted that a strategy is devised to accomplish the intended goals after determining what the curriculum is to achieve "in regard to its services, research, student learning, and faculty/staff development programs" (p. 14). A systematic method of evaluation, outcomes-based assessment is a continuous process, which recurs on a timeline in order to ascertain "whether the program improvements contribute to the intended outcomes" (Bresciani, 2006, p. 14).

As noted in the literature, there are several integral components that make up a quality outcomes-based assessment process (Bresciani, 2006; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Suskie, 2004). These components should include: (a) defining mission statements, (b) defining goals, (c) distinguishing between

institutional, division, and programmatic learning outcomes, (d) mapping learning outcomes, (e) planning the delivery of your outcomes, (f) choosing a method and criteria to assess, (g) reporting and interpreting results, (h) using results to make decisions and recommendations, and (i) establishing a timeline for implementation and improvement (Bresciani et al., 2009).

The researchers were interested in learning from the students, faculty, staff, and community partners of Western Community College and the University of the Coast whether these two institutions incorporated a systematic outcomes-based assessment process when evaluating the effectiveness of their service-learning courses. However, if the institutions utilized outcomes-based assessment, how did they handle this process?

From this study, the researchers were able to determine that Western Community College and the University of the Coast evaluated the effectiveness of their service-learning programs by (a) the success of their collaborative partnerships, (b) the successful connection of their students' curricular and co-curricular experiences, (c) the availability of reflection opportunities, (d) the depth of the students' feedback and assessment opportunities, and (e) the sustainability of the program. Although there were many similarities between Western Community College and the University of the Coast, only the University of the Coast incorporated a one-unit for credit leadership course, which was designed to train selected service-learning student leaders to work as site coordinators. Site coordinators serve as intermediaries between the service-learning students, faculty, community partners and the Community Service-Learning Center to make sure that the academic aspects of the course are being met along with the needs of the partners. The following study illustrates the process used to discover how and which of these portions of the systematic outcomes-based process are present.

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Methodology

Research Design

This cross-case comparative study explored through a constructive lens whether implementation of a systematic outcomes-based assessment process is necessary to determine whether quality of service-learning programs are present in a four-year private institution and a public community college, referred to as the University of the Coast and Western Community College. The researchers selected a multiple case study as the specific methodology type since it works very well for gathering information to explore the factors that may lead to sustainable, high-quality service learning programs and since this model is very appropriate "whenever it is human inquiry that is being considered" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 82). The researchers also chose the constructive method since its flexibility enabled them to pursue avenues of investigation that may arise during the investigation process, making this paradigm open to finding out new information and substantiating it (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The researchers defined quality based upon an extensive literature review of the characteristics of quality service-learning programs and by the research process that uncovered components of a systematic outcomes-based assessment.

The researchers utilized multiple sources of data collection, including one-on-one interviews and focus groups with students, faculty, staff members, and community partners and on-site observations as well as document analysis of (a) students' journals from class, (b) faculty or staff reports, (c) student assessment, (d) faculty and staff assessments, and (e) partnership assessments. The researchers also reviewed the assessment plans of students, faculty and or staff members, and community partners.

Site Selection and Sampling Method

The researchers selected Western Community College's Service-Learning Program and the University of the Coast's Community Service-Learning Center for the study since these particular institutions have long established service-learning programs with strong

ties to their respective communities. In addition, these two institutions are very different from each other. For example, Western Community College is large, two-year public educational institution relying on state funding and the University of the Coast is a private, four-year church-based educational institution with an endowment of hundreds of millions of dollars.

There were 26 participants in the study, five of whom were males. In addition to one-on-one interviews with 18 persons including (a) five students, (b) six faculty members, (c) three staff members, and (d) four community partners, there were two focus groups with a total of eight students. The researchers utilized purposeful sampling and asked the service-learning administrators at both institutions to identify faculty or staff members for one-on-one interviews, who had different areas of service-learning expertise and varying degrees of experience in service learning. Based on the recommendations of the service-learning coordinators, the researchers interviewed community partners from (a) both small and large non-profit organizations, (b) long established and newly formed non-profit organizations, (c) those working with different age groups, different socio-economic groups, and different ethnic groups.

In framing the interview protocols for one-on-one interviews and focus groups, the researchers selected a set of specific questions derived from a review of literature, which added focus and meaning to the research question. These particular questions provided insight into what factors the participants believed were essential components of quality service-learning programs. Another integral component of this cross-case comparative study were observations at partner sites and a document analysis of official documents, such as strategic plans, assessment plans, student evaluations, reflections, and mission statements. These public documents not only enriched the study and helped the researchers determine if these two institutions of higher education had the characteristics of quality service-learning programs, but also supplemented the other methods of the study, providing more depth to the researchers' findings.

Data Analysis

Using a "process of inductive reasoning, thinking, and theorizing" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 140), the researchers analyzed recorded transcripts of the one-on-one interviews and focus groups. From the transcripts, the researchers captured from students, faculty, staff members, and partners their feelings about their service-learning programs including (a) their reactions to their service-learning experience, (b) their definition of sustainability, (c) their interactions with all of the entities that comprise the program, and (d) any issues of concern.

Findings and Discussion

> **"In our opinion, Western Community College and University of the Coast are successful since both institutions use a variety of ways to determine learning outcomes for their service-learning courses."**

While determining whether each institution has a systematic outcomes-based assessment process in place, and if not, identifying what components of a systematic outcomes-based assessment process exist, the researchers learned there is close communication among all of the entities of both service-learning programs. Although the University of the Coast's Community Service-Learning Center and Western Community College's Service-Learning Program do not have a systematic outcomes-based assessment process, both programs have numerous components of the process in place, such as (a) incorporating feedback, including surveys and evaluations from students, faculty, and community partners as part of an internal assessment process to make necessary changes that have improved their respective service-learning programs; (b) having the service-learning administrators interface with faculty on an individual basis to review the service-learning component for their courses and devise learning outcomes; (c) providing numerous orientation and training opportunities, including workshops to assist faculty in developing learning outcomes; and (d) encouraging close communication, enabling the entities in the partnership to interface and share their ideas and concerns. Both institutions communicated "a shared purpose and vision…defining

goals" (Bresciani et al., 2009, pp. 36-37), which should be present in an outcomes-based assessment.

A formalized feedback and assessment process is an important factor leading to the success of both service-learning programs. Both the service-learning coordinator at Western Community College and the director and assistant director of the University of the Coast's Community Service-Learning Center place great emphasis on both feedback and assessment by maintaining close communication with all entities providing (a) guidance about the purpose, goals, and logistics of service-learning programs, (b) information about the community partners and how their mission may complement the academic aspects of service-learning courses, and (c) information about the service-learning sites to assist faculty in designing and implementing programs to achieve the expected learning outcomes. This information not only educates students, faculty, and partners, but also enables them to solicit feedback, strengthening the assessment process.

Although neither the University of the Coast nor Western Community College utilize a systematic outcomes-based process, faculty members meet with service-learning program administrators to discuss learning outcomes. According to Bresciani (2006), in an outcomes-based assessment, it is important to "engage in these conversations faculty and staff who are well respected in their disciplines and in their research" to lessen "…the common misconceptions that outcomes-based assessment is just another fad or a process built by administrators to 'check up' on the work of the faculty" (p. 19). Bresciani also noted that the information compiled through this process promotes discussions about responsibility and may lead to "opportunities for improvement" (p. 15).

From the interviews and document analysis, the researchers determined that Western Community College established several outcomes in its Unit Assessment Report (2008-2009, pp. 1-4) that included (a) increasing the service-learning skills of its student advocates by providing leadership training to plan a community service project, (b) advancing critical and reflective thinking skills to encourage connections between curricular and co-curricular experiences, and (c) increasing student knowledge about the organizations which are their community service-learning partners. However, the Unit Assessment Report tracks only a few objectives and does not reflect the work of the entire program. According to the University of the Coast Strategic Plan, "Our key success factors are our outcome measures of success. They measure how successfully the University of the Coast Community Service-Learning Center is achieving our Mission, Vision 2012, and our Core Values on a year-by-year basis" (2008-2012, p. 8).

In our opinion, Western Community College and the University of the Coast are successful since both institutions use a variety of ways to determine learning outcomes for their service-learning courses. Neither institution utilizes a systematic outcomes based assessment that provides integration between course outcomes and program outcomes, the purpose of which is to provide "quality assurance and external accountability in higher education" (Bresciani, 2006, p. 13). From the comments of the participants in the study, the researchers learned that the instructors at Western Community College and the University of the Coast make their students aware of the expected learning outcomes from their courses. For instance, in an ongoing systematic manner, both institutions have (a) devised the learning outcomes for their courses, (b) gathered feedback, (c) assessed it, (d) made necessary changes, and (e) evaluated the results of the changes to determine if students are achieving the expected learning outcomes purposefully established, a process that has characteristics of an outcomes-based assessment (Bresciani, 2006).

The document analysis not only provided insight into the assessment procedures at the University of the Coast and Western Community College, but also reinforced the findings from the interviews and focus groups. For example, Western Community College's Unit Assessment Report 2008 went into great detail regarding Western Community Colleges outcomes such as increasing the service-learning skills of its student advocates by

providing leadership training to plan a community service project and increasing student knowledge about the organizations which are community service-learning partners. The University of the Coast's service-learning rubric was very specific and provides guidelines and structure. It can be an excellent tool to assess academic achievement of the curricular and co-curricular experiences and may provide as much or more structure for systematic assessment than a formalized plan would provide. In addition, in the University of the Coast Community Service-Learning Center Strategic plan (2008-2012), the Community Service-Learning Center placed a great deal of emphasis on the assessment and evaluation of its service-learning programs and incorporated these categories into the document.

Although Western Community College is not utilizing an ongoing systematic outcomes-based assessment at this time, the coordinator is working with the faculty and administrators to establish overall learning outcomes of the service-learning program and not just the learning outcomes for particular courses. She is putting into place "a systematic process of evaluation . . . repeated at a later date to determine whether the program improvements contribute to the intended learning outcomes" to incorporate components of an ongoing systematic outcomes-based assessment (Bresciani, 2006, p. 14). According to McEwen (1996), "Carefully designed service-learning experiences can lead to profound learning and development outcomes for students, the primary reason that institutions of higher education engage in service-learning" (p. 53). Matt, assistant director of the service-learning programs at the University of the Coast, also discussed the importance of establishing learning objectives in designing programs and "getting a buy-in" from all of the stakeholders. "Getting their [stakeholders'] input and seeing how they think the program should be run . . . helps guide you," Matt continued. Even though the University of the Coast does not have a systematic on-going outcomes-based assessment process, they are devising learning outcomes not only for individual courses, but also for their overall service-learning program.

The close interaction and ongoing quality checks between both the service-learning administrators at University of the Coast and at Western Community College and their respective stakeholders is instrumental in achieving the intended outcomes of their service-learning programs. Constant communication between all of the entities is essential to preserve quality, especially when there are changes in the staffing at a community partner's service-learning site. Based on the study, an important component of Western Community College and the University of the Coast's success is the fact that both institutions have strong and stable service-learning departments where their staff members maintain close ties with all of the stakeholders.

In addition, both institutions' service-learning departments work directly with faculty, helping them to assess learning outcomes for the course on an individual basis, but the learning outcomes are not integrated with program outcomes. However, the importance of utilizing a formalized systematic on-going outcomes-based assessment process cannot be overlooked. For example, if there were changes in the hierarchy of the service-learning programs at either institution and a new coordinator or director replaced Michelle or Wendy, gaps in leadership may develop, and their successful service-learning programs may suffer.

The University of the Coast and Western Community College's service-learning programs succeeded without a systematic ongoing outcomes-based assessment review due to the fact that they implemented the characteristics of a quality service-learning program, including informally and continuously soliciting feedback and making evaluations. However, other two-year and four-year institutions may not experience the same results without a systematic outcomes-based assessment process if they do not incorporate the same quality characteristics as the University of the Coast and Western Community College.

Even though an outcomes-based assessment process does not exist at the

University of the Coast's Community Service-Learning Center and Western Community College's Service-Learning Program, based on this study, both institutions appear to have quality service-learning programs as noted by (a) their sustainability; (b) the satisfaction of their students, faculty, and community partners; (c) the agreement on the intended learning goals and how the program meets the needs of the community; (d) and the learning that takes place, which is reflected in the feedback and reflection activities. From the study, the researchers determined that both institutions (a) have clearly defined their mission statements through an excellent communication network, (b) have carefully identified the goals of their individual service-learning programs even though this identification is not always a collaborative effort between the faculty and service-learning staff, but at a later time is mutually discussed and understood, (c) selected appropriate assessment methods through a variety of different processes appropriate for the particular program, (d) report and interpret results to all of the partners, and (e) use the results to make decisions and recommendations for program improvement.

While faculty members and service-learning administrators at Western Community College and the University of the Coast devise learning outcomes and are working towards distinguishing between and integrating the different types of learning outcomes, the process is still under development at both institutions. The institutions' missing pieces are (a) not incorporating a segmented process for the developing the achievement of learning outcomes, (b) the lack of integration between service-learning administrators and faculty in identifying whether the learning outcomes have been achieved, (c) the lack of a systematic process for conducting assessments, (d) not systematically identifying, the results of the learning outcomes, (e) not consistently utilizing the results of the assessment for program improvement or recommendations, and (f) not consistently repeating the evaluation process to measure whether the improvements or recommendations have resulted in the achievement of the learning outcomes.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

The findings of this study reveal that while a systematic outcomes-based assessment process did not exist at the University of the Coast and Western Community College, there was evidence of quality in both programs that were studied since both institutions demonstrated several effective assessment practices. For example, they placed great emphasis on feedback and assessment between their various constituent groups. Western Community College has also increased the frequency of its program reviews and has incorporated learning outcomes into the process, and the University of the Coast has created a Service-Learning Student Learning Rubric. In addition to surveys and the rubric, some professors teaching service-learning courses have students write literacy case studies. For example, according to third-year student, Alice, literacy case studies not only help to evaluate the progress service-learning students made tutoring youngsters, but also enable them to make suggestions for improvement. The University of the Coast uses both formal assessments with a paper trail and informal assessments, and according to Wendy, director of the University's Community Service-Learning Center, "With the partners, we moved from formal to more checking in at the beginning and end of each semester with personal conversations." Feedback has always been an essential part of the University's assessment process and, according to the University of the Coast Community Service-Learning Center Annual Report (2005-2006), great emphasis is placed on student feedback to determine what students are learning from their community experiences. Feedback from this objective came from an evaluation by 256 students replying to 15 statements answered on a Likert scale; "97% of the students responded favorably that the service experience helped them better understand their organization" (Western Community College Unit Assessment Report, 2008-2009, p. 4).

The researchers recommend that both institutions continue to expand on these assessment practices, such as the feedback and reflection activities that they have in place. However, the level of quality could only be identified because the researchers conducted a

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thorough cross-case comparative study in order to find the data that revealed the quality of the programs. Thus, unless an institution has a commitment from its leadership to continue a program regardless of the quality of data they are able to produce in a systematic way, it may be wise to engage in a systematic outcomes-based assessment process or at the very least, engage researchers to conduct a thorough case study so that quality data and evidence of decision-making can emerge and be documented.

While it may not be necessary for both institutions to incorporate an ongoing systematic outcomes-based assessment process at this time because of their institutional leadership commitment to continue service-learning, the researchers believe it would be helpful for them to do so given the scope of their service-learning programs and the continued expansion of their outreach student and community outreach efforts. After a systematic outcomes-based assessment process is developed and in place, it may take less time to generate accurate data to determine whether there is a quality program, thus, saving time later in replicating a similar study to the one conducted at Western Community College and the University of the Coast.

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