ABSTRACT

Service-Learning has evolved beyond simply asking to have students engage in community activities. Service-Learning has become an integral part of our educational system. Having the ability to judge the effectiveness of a service- learning project has become an important component in Higher Education. The purpose of this article is to provide a step by step planning process of assessment for your next service-learning project.

How Are We Doing? Making Service-Learning Assessment Simple

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So, who says that assessment always has to be difficult and painful or a useless exercise other than to catch dust on the bookshelf? It does not have to be any of the above. This article is written to provide the reader with a simple "menu" mindset when thinking about how to best document the success of latest creative service-learning project. There are a few basic standards to work by when considering assessment that serve as the backbone for many other significantly complicated models. This article will provide you with the ABC's of assessment and take the pain out of planning the evaluation plan of your next project! A model for planning assessment is proposed with examples and worksheet provided. The point is to learn the basics, learn how to use components that are easily built in as support data for continuation, justification for adjustment, or re-defining future use of limited resources. It is imperative that assessment be simple and meaningful.

The University of Minnesota (2012) outlined its service-learning as a direct experience applying content, ideas and issues discussed in a class through volunteering at a community organization. While Missouri State University (2012) has options for students to earn academic credit in selected courses in exchange for meaningful and productive community service. The definition of service-learning by the national clearinghouse on service-learning suggested,

"Service-Learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (2012). Students learn concepts in the classroom and then integrate traditional academic work with community-based service projects. Therefore, service-learning allows educational systems the opportunity to use structured community service activities rather than traditional classrooms to gain further understanding of course content (Anderson, 2002; McDonald, Caso, & Fugit, 2005; Poulin, Silver, & Kauffman,2006; Roos et al., 2005; Shastri, 2001; Whitbourne, Collins, & Skultety, 2001). Jacobson, J., Oravecz, L., Falk, A., & Osteen, P. (2011) believed that service-learning can assist institutions in meeting community based missions.

Recently, the former UL System President, Randy Moffett stated that, "Many people confuse service-learning with volunteerism, but in reality there is a strong academic component involved with service-learning. College and university students are taking what they learn in the classroom and are applying it in real-world situations while volunteering in their communities." It can be a bit confusing when trying to wrestle with how to plan, implement, and assess an activity that is, at best, complex and multilayered. What appears to be rather consistent in all the definitions are the marriage of the constructs of instruction to students, service, and community. With these components in mind, regardless of how you line them up, you can begin to think about specific steps (see Figure 1) of approaching assessment of service-learning projects.

Figure 1. Steps in Developing a Service-Learning Project

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Stakeholders
Goal
Objectives
Strategies
Assessment
Results
Review
Recommendations
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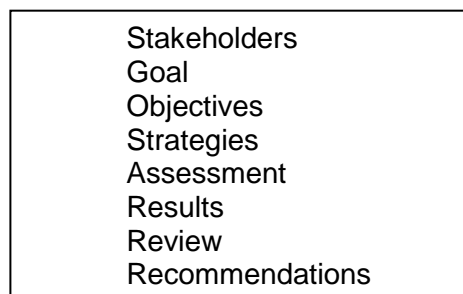
The first step is to clearly identify primary stakeholders for your project. Meaning, who will stand to gain from this experience? With this in mind it is hopeful that minimally you will be addressing a group of students and the target population they will serve. You might also consider faculty, department, university, and the larger community at hand. Once you have identified your stakeholders you are ready to consider your overall goal for the project by asking yourself: "What is it that I really want to see happen as a result of successful completion?" You are encouraged to think about this in rather altruistic terms that include the impact expected by pairing your students, a specified module of curriculum knowledge, and a population in need. While you do not need to go as far as "world peace", it is very appropriate to consider the greater impact of hands on learning through serving such as character building, awareness, partnerships, solving real-life problems to enhance communities, etc.

After determining the greater good of your project you will be ready to determine the objectives. It is not necessary to go overboard or to even try to name every possible outcome
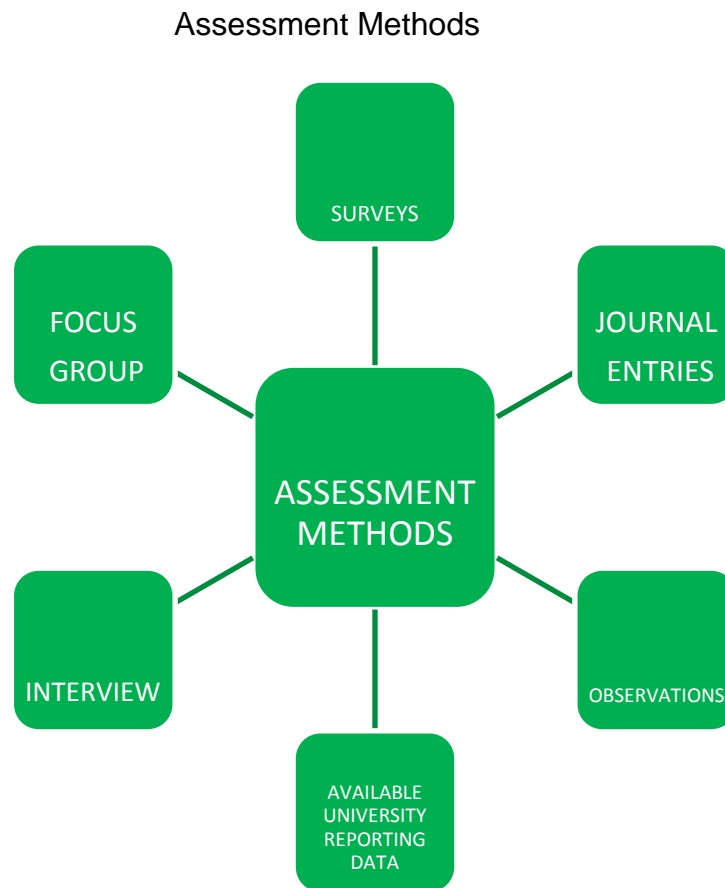
wished for. Instead, it is good to simply ask yourself: "What does each stakeholder need to know or do at the end of this project for it to be successful?" Just one or two primary objectives for each of the stakeholders are appropriate. Objectives may be what are called process objectives, meaning those that are relational in nature. Process objectives are often used when a construct is more difficult to measure qualitatively. Examples may include ideas such as quality of academic experience, enhanced relationships, professional development, or perception.

Content objectives, on the other hand, are often learning or fact based. These objectives will often be tied to the learning outcomes of your service learning curriculum. Examples could include unit curriculum objectives, critical thinking, mastery of observable skills, or completion of academic requirements towards a given goal.

Lastly, some objectives may be what are referred to as impact objectives. This type of objective is often related to the longer-term benefits of the shared knowledge through service by students. For instance, objectives such as financial impact, dollars raised in fundraising, student retention or graduation rates.

There is not a formula for the type of objectives chosen, just that you can reasonably tie the completion of the combined objectives (project outcomes) to a successful experience (meeting your goal). At this point you may want to sit back, review your stakeholders and objectives and ask yourself: "If each of these stakeholder groups succeeded in accomplishing the stated knowledge or behaviors would the project be successful? Would the goal be met? Look for gaps and fill in objectives as needed.

Now, some may be wondering…"How would I know? What evidence would show success?" The answer is in thinking about what data or evidence can be at your fingertips by simply carrying out your project. Each objective likely has assessment value easily built in. The question to ask when determining assessment is: What evidence will show that the objective will be complete and successful and are there any methods readily available. "Do ability" is the key to the assessment step. For instance, if the objective is curriculum based, then if you have a grade or a portfolio piece required simply utilize it. If you have meetings with your community partner anyway, build in a 30 minute focus group. If your objective includes retention and your university provides retention data through institutional research request that the report include numbers for your class so you can compare to other classes. The more ambiguous your objective (i.e. awareness, responsibility, sensitivity), the more likely you will need to develop a brief list of specific focus questions to gather some qualitative data either through a focus group or interview. Remember that your outcomes will typically be in the form of data, product, knowledge, behavior, or perception. Below (see Figure 2) is a list of possible assessment methods for your consideration.

Figure 2. Assessment Methods in Service-Learning

Assessment Methods

SURVEYS

FOCUS GROUP

JOURNAL ENTRIES

ASSESSMENT METHODS

INTERVIEW

OBSERVATIONS

AVAILABLE UNIVERSITY REPORTING DATA

     The steps in assessment planning are made much easier when you think through the process in a series of logical steps. Each component requires asking and answering a single question (see Figure 3) that when added up the lists of questions comprise the details of your service-learning project.

Figure 3. Service-Learning Steps with Questions

Stakeholders	Who will stand to gain from this experience?
Goal	What is it that I really want to see happen as a result of successful completion?
Objectives	What does each stakeholder need to know or do at the end of this project for it to be successful?
Strategies	What specific steps need to be taken, by who, and when to make this project happen successfully?
Assessment	What evidence would demonstrate success?

The following assessment worksheet is a sample completed for your consideration based on a project implemented last year by graduate students completing a master's degree in clinical psychology at Northwestern State University. The partnership was between the psychology department, the university counseling center, and the student body community.

The students are required to complete academic courses related to both diagnosis of mental health disorders and assessment. In order to allow students real life experience as part of their training a service-learning activity was planned specifically around the training of assessment of depressive disorders. National Depression Screening Day is hosted by America Mental Health Organization during Mental Illness Awareness Week each October. It is designed to increase awareness to the illness of depression on a national level, educate the public, offer individuals the opportunity to be screened, and refer those in need of treatment to the mental health care system. The graduate program partnered with the university counseling center to hold a depression screening day at the student union with the graduate student providing the screenings under the direction of clinical supervisors and making appropriate referrals to the university counseling center when indicated. The following is provided as a sample of an assessment plan worksheet (see Figure 4) for the National Depression Screening Day service-learning project.

Figure 4. Service-Learning Assessment Plan Worksheet

SAMPLE ASSESSMENT PLAN

PROJECT TITLE: National Depression Screening Day

PRIMARY STAKEHOLDERS:
1. Graduate Students- Department of Psychology
2. NSU Student Body
3. University Counseling center
4. Northwestern State University

PROJECT GOAL: To increase the clinical psychology graduate students involvement with the campus community and participation in national prevention efforts through implementation of professional skills to include screening and referral for National Depression Screening Day for Northwestern State University.

OBJECTIVES:

Stakeholder 1. Graduate Students – Department of Psychology
    Objective 1.1 Graduate students will develop and evidence a mastery of DSM IV-R Depressive Disorder Diagnosis.

Assessment
Grade from unit curriculum on depressive disorders

    Objective 1.2 Graduate students will utilize knowledge and practice to conduct depression screening effectively in order to make appropriate referrals to the university counseling center.

Assessment
Performance skill set grade
Practice video in portfolio

    Objective 1.3 Graduate students will remain engaged in curriculum and complete graduate program successfully.

Assessment
Graduate student perception survey

Stakeholder 2 NSU Student Body
    Objective 2.1 The NSU student body will be given the opportunity to complete screenings to identify those students in need of referral to the NSU counseling center for assessment and/or treatment.

Assessment
# of students screened
# of students referred for assessment

Stakeholder 3 University Counseling Center

    Objective 3.1 The counseling center will provide additional depression assessment, diagnosis, and treatment based on the graduate students screening and referrals to address campus mental health.

Assessment
# of referrals obtaining services
Follow-up focus group between graduate students and counseling center staff

Stakeholder 4 Northwestern State University

    Objective 4.1 Increase graduate student retention through increased knowledge, real world application in career field, and enhanced professional relationships with faculty and staff.

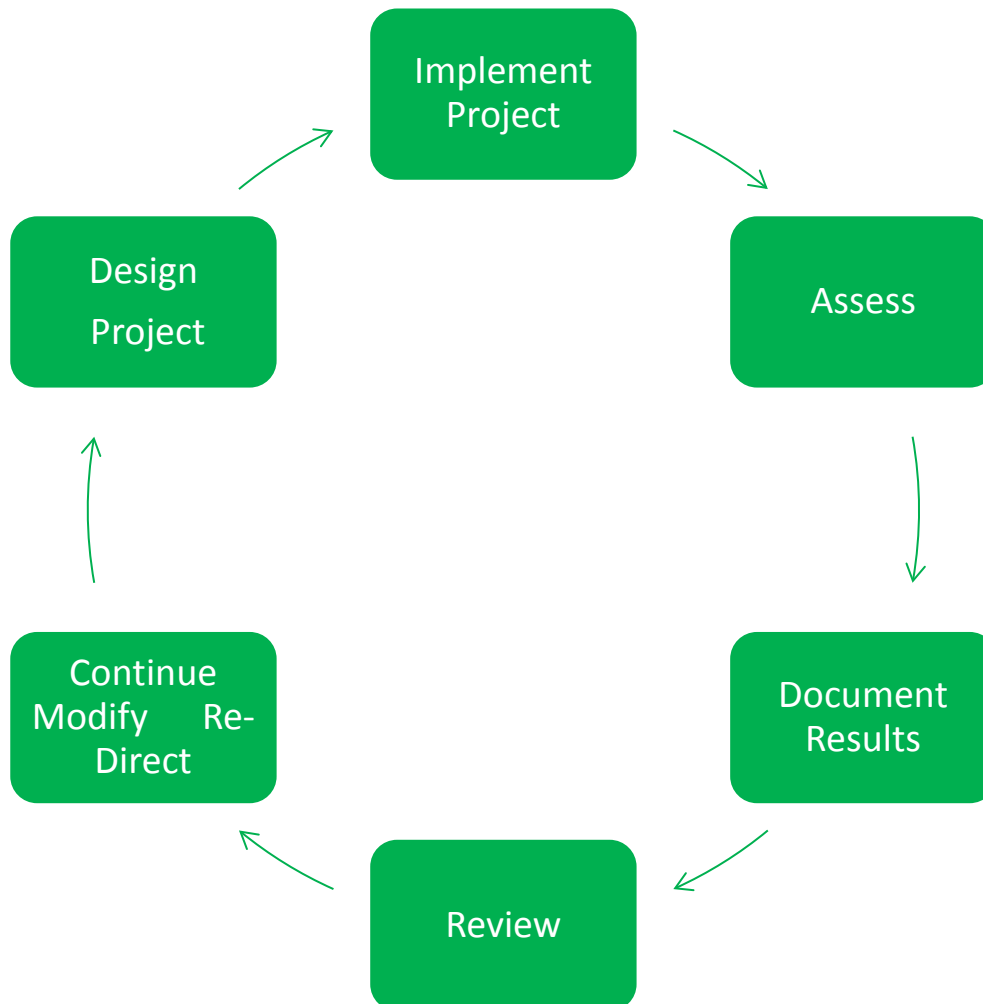| Assessment |
|---|
| Retention data for first to second year of graduate school clinical psychology students |

STRATEGIES

    Strategies are the specific steps needed to accomplish the goal. They are broken down by each objective, are very specific and are accompanied by an identified responsible party and also a due date. When your strategies are strung together, they should represent each step of your project from beginning to end. Specific strategies are not identified for this example since they are very specific in nature to each project.

RESULTS & RECOMMENDATIONS

    After completion of the project and assessment it is important to document the results of your project in a simple report format and to use these results to suggest continuation, modifications, or re-direction for the future. These actions provide professional closure to the project.

    In order for assessment to be complete, you should at least consider both formative and summative alternatives. Summative evaluation is referred to as data reviewed as an end product or summing up, whereas formative evaluation is intended to help both student and teacher focus on learning experiences needed to move towards mastery of a subject and occur through a process (Aiken & Groth-Marnat 2006). In addition remember that assessment can be completed for any and all stakeholders, it is not complete if you only assess the students involved, the target population that is served is a wonderful source of information. A complete assessment includes moving beyond simply gathering the results and reporting (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Feedback Loop Diagram

A successful project includes assessment of progress throughout implementation and follow-up upon completion. This continuation of planning is called a continuous planning cycle or "closing the gap". It simply means that after the project is complete and all results are gathered that you sit with others invested in the success or continuation of service-learning efforts and review all the information to make informed decisions regarding future direction. If your project was a one-time event, then is allows you to document in a way that can be used for faculty, departmental, or university reporting. It may also be used for research presentations or publications. The review may lead to a recommendation for continuation or repeat of the project with improvements or expansion. Other modifications may be made based on lessons learned or the project resources may be re-directed if results do not warrant the use of time, expertise, and funding. Remember that documentation of your efforts and strong assessment data can often lead to justification for additional funding through the university, department, or grants. The information gathered assists in making decisions about allocation of time, energy, people, and funding.

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