

—Civic Engagement and Student Outcomes: An Evaluation Synthesis of Best Practices  
in Professional Service-Learning Curricula—

submitted by

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A grant proposal submitted to the Davenport-Hatch Faculty Research Award Committee, March 27, 2003.

## Literature Review and Research Design

“Tell me, I’ll listen. Show me, I’ll believe. Involve me, I’ll learn”

—Native American proverb

The School of Professions has to prepare students for leadership in 21<sup>st</sup> Century organizations—be they public, private, or nonprofit. Increasingly, such leadership is carried out in organizations characterized by participatory decision-making structures, horizontal collaboration among groups, and cross-sectoral partnerships (Drucker, 1994; Savitch, 1998; Ostroff, 1999; Rochon, 2001).<sup>1</sup> How can we prepare our students to excel in this environment? A growing body of work has pointed towards the efficacy of “service-learning” techniques<sup>2</sup> as an effective vehicle for preparing our future leaders to manage—and make a difference—in the increasingly complex networks of public, private, and nonprofit organizations that formulate and deliver public services in a modern society.

Not only has research linked service learning with a variety of direct student learning outcomes—including enhanced student retention, academic performance, deep understanding, and leadership and team building skills (Friedman, 1996; Astin et al., 2000; Eyster, 2002)—but recent findings have shown that the increased civic engagement and social networks (Putnam, 2000; Astin et al., 2000) that go along with service learning can have powerful implications for long-term career success.

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<sup>1</sup> “The organizational demands of a shift from standardized mass production to adaptive flexible production has resulted in a partial intermingling of the role of managers and workers who develop strategies in collaboration with each other. The greatest change of all may be the increased reliance of interorganization coordination. Horizontal collaboration often replaces vertical integration” (Rochon, 2001: 247). Drucker (1994) has concluded that our current epoch is characterized by “an economic order in which knowledge, not labor or raw material or capital, is the key resource; a social order in which inequality based on knowledge is a major challenge; and a polity in which government cannot be looked to for solving social and economic problems” (p. 53).

<sup>2</sup> The Academy of Management defines service learning as “an academically rigorous instructional method that incorporates meaningful community service into the curriculum. Focusing on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility, service-learning involves students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, sense of civic responsibility, respect for other, and commitment to the community” (Academy of Management, 2002). Service learning rests on the cognitive tenet that while, “we remember only 10% of what we hear, 15% of what we see, and a mere 20% of what we see and hear, . . . we retain 60% of what we do, 80% of what we do with active guided reflection, an 90% of what we teach or give to others” (Alamo Community College Faculty Handbook for Understanding and Implementing Service Learning in the Classroom, 2003).

In light of this research, a growing number of university campus presidents (Campus Compact, 2000), academic programs (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002), and accrediting bodies (Academy of Management, 2002) are taking notice of the potential benefits of service learning to the students, teachers, and communities involved and have embarked on initiatives to develop service-learning curricula.<sup>3</sup>

I strongly agree with these efforts; my aim is to conduct research into best practices that will assist in the implementation of cutting-edge service-learning curricula into the School's Master of Public Administration program. I propose a research design that can add to the service-learning scholarship while simultaneously helping the program to make curriculum-based decisions.

#### Design: A Meta-Analysis of Studies on Service Learning in Graduate Professional Programs

Service-learning activities have now been around long enough that there is a growing body of research on service-learning practices and outcomes (for an overview, see Eyler, 2002). What would now provide useful results is to conduct evaluation syntheses, or "meta-analyses," of the findings contained in these disparate individual studies. I therefore propose to conduct a meta-analysis of existing research on service-learning in professional graduate programs.

This meta-evaluation seeks to collate and classify the numerous practices, outcomes, and assessment tools that have been studied by service-learning scholars in published forums. This study is designed to help interested parties answer three basic questions: What has been tried? What has been tested? And what has been found? The benefit of utilizing the evaluation synthesis design is that it "aggregates the findings from individual studies to provide a conclusion more credible than that of any one study" (General Accounting Office, 1991: 64). Since such syntheses normally help identify gaps in available information, this project will be further helpful in clarifying and advancing the debate on best practices in service learning.

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<sup>3</sup> "Service-learning...has grown dramatically in popularity over the past decade...because it seems ideally suited to achieving both personal and academic goals for students and broader goals of civic engagement" (Eyler, 2002: 517).

The first step will be to select the specific studies whose findings will be included in the evaluation synthesis. Only those studies that employ rigorous testing procedures and identifiable outcomes will be considered. A preliminary list of sources for this meta-analysis is contained in the “References” section attached to this proposal. There are several primary outlets where this research is housed. First, there are scholarly journals, such as the *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* and the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, which deal specifically with research on service learning. Second, there are journals that specialize in higher education, such as the *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, the *Journal of Higher Education*, and the *Journal of College Student Development*, that also publish timely service-learning research. Likewise, there is a wide range of relevant disciplinary journals that have published pertinent findings, including the *Journal of Business Ethics*, the *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, and the *Public Administration Review*. Lastly, there are several prominent “clearinghouses” for service-learning research on the world wide web, most notably Campus Compact and the National Service Learning Clearinghouse.

In addition to helping shed light on the most critical debates surrounding practices and outcomes, this analysis will help us to answer numerous questions in developing curricular changes. For instance, would a centralized Departmental “Virtual Service Learning Center” help coordinate and publicize service learning achievements? Is it better to have students rather than professors take the lead in developing service-learning projects? Which service-learning practices yield the best learning outcomes? Do graded or ungraded projects deliver better results? Are team service-learning projects better than individual projects (or is a mix the best approach)? What specific service learning activities and “deliverables” lead to the optimal outcomes (e.g., presentations, written reports, group discussions, etc.)? What types of activities are most likely to enhance students’ long-term “civic engagement” outcomes—leaving them with expanded social networks and an elevated sense of civic responsibility? How is service learning

implemented in distance-education courses? And what assessment instruments deliver the most valid and reliable results on these outcomes?

#### Utility of Research Results to Scholarly Community and Departmental Assessment Efforts

This study is designed, first and foremost, to be an original piece of research that adds to the growing literature on service learning. Accordingly, it would be appropriate to disseminate the findings to the scholarly community, beginning with a presentation at the annual meeting of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), and ending with an article submission, most likely to the *Journal of Public Affairs Education*.

At the same time, with a focus on professional graduate education, it is a design whose findings can be brought to bear on critical program decisions. One of my ultimate goals is to enhance and formalize the Department's service-learning efforts based on research into best practices. I believe the proposed design and consequent recommendations can help us to develop such innovative curricula, an especially important aim given the Department's upcoming re-accreditation by NASPAA—an organization that has begun to heavily promote service-learning endeavors.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, this project dovetails with one of the core components of the Department's mission—to advance excellence in public management through service to the profession, the university, and the community—as well as with the strengths of the University itself. What is SUNY Brockport's niche? It is not to train a national elite so much as a *regional* one—we are, after all, “Rochester's public university.” The majority of our students stay and work in Western New York. Our strength therefore lies in the *community*. Successful service-learning curricula could provide both the community and the MPA program with important benefits above and beyond the considerable student learning outcomes.

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<sup>4</sup>NASPAA, “the accrediting body for public administration and policy graduate programs, has embarked on an initiative to place service back into public service. NASPAA hopes to influence MPA programs to emphasize service to others for students as they assume positions of government authority” (Academy of Management web site, 2002).

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