Narratives of Community Service:  
Blending Program Assessment, Faculty Research, & Student Development

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Our work builds on research establishing community service as a high-impact practice increasing retention and academic success (Kuh 2008). It is grounded in evidence that student reflection on off-campus experience is a critical component of a successful program of community-engaged learning (Bringle, Reeb, Brown, & Ruiz, 2016; Zukin et al., 2006). We are completing the fourth year of a study of the Rhodes Bonner Scholars Program, an endowed service scholarship providing college access for underrepresented students who engage in regular service and reflection throughout their college career. We seek to blur the lines between:

- implementation of program goals and assessment of program effectiveness,
- program assessment and faculty research, and
- faculty, staff, and student domains of expertise

The epistemological grounding for our approach requires the collaboration of an interdisciplinary team, including students, staff, and faculty involved in all aspects of the research. We have nurtured an interpretive community with different disciplinary training and locations within our institution. Our research is participatory, so that the Bonner Scholars whose narratives constitute our data also help us formulate research questions. We regularly present preliminary findings that lead to refinement of the Bonner programming. Student and staff discussion of these findings guide our interpretative work, resulting in a seamless dialogue between program development and assessment.

Workshop Goals: Attendees will explore how participatory research strategies and student narrative accounts, studied in an interpretive community, can address questions about both student development and program effectiveness.

Work with Student Narratives

Working in quickly assembled approximations of interpretive communities, participants will examine a small set of stories written by Bonner Scholars about their community engagement experiences. We will use two interpretive frames as we explore these narratives together.
A. Student Development Frame: Narrative as Reflecting or Constructing Emerging Identities

Identity Development as a Relational Project

Does the author position the self vis-à-vis relationships formed in the service experience? Does he or she grapple with similarities and differences between self and other? Do we see the author formulating a sense of self that is grounded in relationships? That is formulated in contradistinction to those relationships?

Identity Development as a Moral Project

Does the author position the self vis-à-vis a set of ‘oughts’ or ‘shoulds’ that arise in the community setting? Does she or he grapple with issues of agency and responsibility, expressing concern about the impact this work may have?

Identity Development as a History Project

Does the author position the self in an historical context? Does he or she grapple with distinguishing between features of the self that are continuous and features that are in flux? Does the author tell a story of a changing self? Of a resistance to change?

B. Program Assessment Frame: Stories that Describe how our Program is Working

If you have or can quickly access a statement of your own institutional or program mission statement, look for specific features of these narratives that are aligned (or that are misaligned) with your own goals. (Otherwise, you may look for evidence of alignment with the Rhodes Mission.)

Do we see evidence in these narratives of learning that is distinct from classroom learning? Do we see evidence of integration of classroom and community-based learning? Consider what these stories reveal about differences and similarities in classroom learning and community-engaged learning.

Participant Reports on the Results of their Work with Narratives

What we can learn about student development from this approach?

What we can learn about program effectiveness from this approach?

What adaptations might make this or features of this useful on your campus?