Service Learning in Public Health: Framework, Results, and Sustainable Community Partnerships

A facilitated discussion session presented at the AAC&U’s Global Engagement and Social Responsibility: Higher Education’s Role in Addressing Global Crises conference

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How it all started?

In April 2012, when the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) issued its yearly call for proposals to support faculty members’ research projects that “examine and reflect upon the teaching and learning practices in specific disciplines”, the leadership of the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) sent out an email inquiring about interest in this call. Several faculty members responded and began to think collectively of potential innovative teaching approaches that could achieve the faculty’s vision which aims to “prepare competent health professionals who are agents of change in society”. A couple of years before this call, AUB had established a Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service (CCECS) to promote civic and community engagement among students and faculty members. CCECS was one partner of a TEMPUS-EU grant that aimed to establish community-based learning programs in universities. Part of the grant activities included providing trainings to faculty members from different disciplines on the subject. Two members of the Center for Public Health Practice (CPHP) of FHS participated in these trainings, and one responded to the call for interested faculty for the CTL grant. After debating several innovative teaching techniques, a team of 7 faculty members chose service learning as a point of research and inquiry. We applied to the CTL grant and received it.

How we made it happen?

CTL grants proposals submitted by individual faculty can be funded for budgets not exceeding $7,000. We had included a larger budget as part of the proposal, and since we were the only group (rather than individual) that applied to the CTL grant, a request was made by the leadership at FHS to CTL to increase the budget granted to the research team, but this request was denied. The research team then discussed other options to supplement the funding of the service learning proposal, and thus linked this research to two other initiatives: the TEMPUS EU project described above and a grant to FHS recently funded by IDRC entitled “Shaping research for health in the Arab World: A systems and network approach to advance knowledge, inform policy, and promote public health”. Under the IDRC project, CPHP was allocated funds to build and sustain effective FHS-community partnerships and advance service learning.

The service learning pedagogy was not a far-off concept to FHS, since historically, many of its faculty members were incorporating into their teaching, application projects or assignments outside the classroom. However, those aspects of community-based learning were not being formally evaluated. In addition, Master of Public Health students in town meetings, exit surveys and discussions, were continuously requesting more out-of-classroom experiences.
How did we develop the Public Health Service Learning Logic Framework?

The research team began by reviewing the literature on service learning as a theory, a concept, and a method. A logic model framework for service learning in public health was developed. The development of the framework was guided by best practices from the literature, existing service learning theories, and lessons learned from previous experiences of faculty members, students and community partners at FHS involved in courses that incorporated some community-based applications within the period of 2010-2012.

The four main outcomes that we aimed to achieve included a) enhancing students’ sense of civic responsibility through their active and participatory engagement in communities; b) improving the students’ learning experience by incorporating structured retrospective and prospective reflection; c) addressing public health needs of communities by providing support and technical resources, and d) developing and sustaining university-community partnerships.

The framework was endorsed by the Dean of FHS and faculty and provided the platform for institutionalizing service learning at a programmatic level at FHS.

Question: What approaches other than service learning could be adopted to achieve the outcomes listed above?

How was it implemented?

In order to facilitate the process, CPHP was identified as the body that will provide institutional support for the service learning initiative. CPHP was responsible for providing technical, logistical and financial support for faculty members and students. CPHP hosted a 2-day workshop for interested faculty members to support them in designing service learning courses. Preparation of courses was accompanied by continuous discussions and advocacy in the faculty to integrate service learning in the curriculum. CPHP staff facilitated access to communities and partners and matched course objectives with partners’ needs. Transportation expenses for students and faculty and the salary of a full-time research assistant were covered by CPHP from the IDRC grant.

The framework was implemented in 6 courses between 2013-2015, with the involvement of 281 students, 7 faculty members and 30 community partners. We partnered with a range of governmental and non-governmental organizations in projects such as: improving the current referral system between 3 NGO primary health centers and 3 public schools; updating medical records at a governmental primary health center; delivering awareness and recreational activities for children with 2 municipalities; producing social marketing plans for campaigns on different topics including drug abuse prevention and safe handling of household cleaning products with NGOs.
Did we succeed? ...

Students’ Perception of Benefit and Change in Attitude

Student evaluation results showed positive outcomes in terms of:

- **Knowledge:** for example, 84% agreed that the service learning experience allowed them to apply theories in a practical field situation thus improving their understanding of the theoretical concepts learned in class; and 93% agreed that as a result of service learning, they are able to understand how organizational factors and external factors affect the ability of an organization to meet community needs;
- **Personal development:** for example, 91% of students agreed that the service learning experience made them more comfortable in professional settings;
- **Interpersonal skills:** for example, 82% agreed that as a result of the service learning, they are better able to communicate ideas to others;
- **Importance of civic engagement:** for example, 86% agreed that as a result of the service learning experience, they are more aware of their responsibility to serve the public good; and
- **Increased tolerance of diversity:** for example, 88% agreed that the SL experience made them more considerate of the existence of diversity in their community.

**Question:** How can we ensure that the gains related to civic engagement are sustained beyond university years?

Students’ Transformational Experience & Integrative Thinking

The service learning initiative provided students with the opportunity to work in teams with disadvantaged/marginalized communities different from their own realities and to reflect individually on their experience. They were asked to reflect on their experience twice: once at the beginning of their community engagement activity and another time at the end. Students experienced significant change in the ways they understood their identity, culture, and behavior as a result of reflecting on their service learning experience. The reflections allowed us to document the personal development and transformation of the students from passive recipients of information to active learners.

*From a student involved in a service learning experience at a public hospital in a disadvantaged area of the city: “When we entered, the smell released from the slaughterhouse was intolerable. I wonder how they could disregard it, I mean it is a hospital that has sick people!...Later on, the picture started to get clearer to me; those people working at the hospital came up with something out of nothing, literally nothing. They maintained this health care system and made it last regardless of the low resources and inputs they had. This shortage in equipment and income encouraged them to work harder and provide better services for their patients.”*

The qualitative reflections of students confirmed the stages of transformational learning: “shock” or “dissonance”, followed by the “internalization” of the experience, and finally active “engagement”. The first impression of the students was shock and disbelief at the state of the sites and communities they serve. The shock provoked the students to question and analyze the underlying economic and political factors leading to these circumstances. Many felt “fortunate” and “blessed”. They started reflecting on
their role in achieving social justice. This internalization phase and the commitment and dedication of those working in dire environments inspired students to become actively engaged.

“I believe after these visits it’s great to realize the privileges we have in such a system. We are truly living “la vie en rose” life while others are not. Nevertheless, it’s our duty to help in providing better services to the less privileged and the start could be by engaging in field experiences at the university level.”

Addressing public health needs of communities

All partners acknowledged the benefit of working with an academic institution to respond to the needs of the community. This was reflected in their reported satisfaction of project outputs, which were tailored specifically to the needs of the targeted community, and which were grounded in evidence-based theories; and by the increased involvement of their staff with the projects.

All partners involved expressed interest and willingness to transform the service learning experience into long-term partnerships.

Question: How can we make sure that the projects carried out by students with partner institutions are actually benefiting the population they are supposed to reach when we know that those institutions lack necessary resources?

Towards developing sustainable university-community partnerships

With intent to enhance the health and environmental outcomes of the populations and communities served, CPHP – in coordination with the service learning research team – made a decision to concentrate the activities of all participating service learning courses in one predefined geographical catchment area: an underprivileged area in Greater Beirut (Area of Sin el Fil-Bourj Hammoud-Nabaa), within close proximity to AUB, and with an active number of NGOs. As we progressed in the service learning courses, the connections to the community solidified, and trust grew.

Service learning at FHS has been adopted as the pathway to forming and sustaining community partnerships. In 2015, CPHP established a long-term partnership with Sin el Fil Municipality (the local authority of this area) with the vision to turn Sin el Fil into a Healthy and Safe City. An action plan to achieve this goal was developed by the technical team at CPHP and the Department of Social Development of the Municipality. Activities are continuously being designed and implemented. This higher engagement and commitment institutionally allowed us to expand the opportunities for working together to achieve greater community goals and provided continued sites for class-based service learning projects of students.

Question: What are some strategies that Universities can use to fund such long-term partnerships?
Where are we now? Moving Service Learning to a programmatic Level!

The formal integration of service learning as a requirement into the academic programs has not yet been achieved. As a result, it remains at the discretion of individual instructors to choose to engage in this approach to teaching. Instructors find that it requires more time for preparation and continuous follow-up and is more complex to implement and assess. Thus, the desired long-term outcomes such as students’ active civic engagement beyond class requirements (as seen on the logic framework) could be compromised. Our future steps include integrating service learning into the core courses required by all students at FHS; this will necessitate a change in the curricula and the commitment of resources in order to ensure the sustainability of this initiative beyond soft funding.

**Question:** What incentives could be provided to faculty members and department chairs to encourage them to introduce necessary changes into courses and programs? How can higher management support those incentives?

**Question:** What in your opinion did we do well? What could we have done better?

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