Multi-Method Approaches to Assessing Civic Engagement Outcomes

AAC&U: The Civic Engagement Imperative Conference
November 10-12, 2005
Presented by: Judy Botelho and Don Coan
Discussion Outline

• Community Service Learning in the CSU
  - Historic Milestones
  - Students in Action (SIA) Program

• How have we evolved in our assessment approach
  - from our initial service-learning (SL) assessment approach to our existing approach with SIA

• What have we learned
  - SL Research Findings
  - SIA Project Impacts (Content Perspective & Process Perspective)

• Where are we now
  - New instruments

• Q & A Session
Community Service Learning in the CSU:
Community Service Learning in the CSU: Historic Milestones

- In 1997, the Community Service Learning Strategic Plan was developed and focused on expanding service learning throughout the system.

- In 1998, the Office of Community Service Learning in the Chancellor’s Office was created to provide leadership and coordination for CSU campuses as they develop and implement community service-learning initiatives.

- In March 2000, the Board of Trustees passed a landmark resolution. Requiring that each CSU president ensure all students have opportunities to participate in community service, service learning, or both.
Community Service Learning in the CSU: Historic Milestones

- In 2004-05, our campuses offered more than 1,800 courses with service-learning components in which more than 65,000 students participated.

- Our students provide over 30 million hours of service, on an annual basis.

- SL courses extend from first year experience through senior capstones and even extend to some graduate programs.
The Students in Action Program

- Student teams from Humboldt, Monterey Bay, San Luis Obispo and San Jose State lead the Students in Action Program (SIA)
The Students in Action GOALS:

- CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
- SKILL DEVELOPMENT
- MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES and HIGHER EDUCATION
- ROLE MODELING
SL/SIA Research Goal

Assess the impact of service learning experiences and participation in community action programs on student learning outcomes: attitudes, interests, skills, knowledge.
Research Studies

- **Quantitative**: two studies focusing on attitude change among students taking service learning courses

- **Qualitative**: one study expanding our research to include interests, skills, and knowledge outcomes for students engaged in SIA projects
SIA Assessment Approach

- Research findings from both types of studies
- Why we moved from quantitative to qualitative assessment
- Two instruments we developed to assess the impact of community service experiences
Quantitative Research on Service Learning Courses

• Two studies:
  • Spring 2002: 700 students in 85 SL courses on 7 campuses
  • Spring 2003: 2800 students in 135 SL courses on 12 campuses

• 18 item questionnaire administered at beginning and end of course

• Measures (item clusters):
  • Community Involvement (5 items)
  • Community Awareness (3 items)
  • Self-Awareness (4 items)
  • Career Identity (4 items)
  • Experiential Learning (2 items)
Results of Research on Service Learning Courses

- **Community Involvement**: More favorable attitudes toward community service and increased personal commitment to solving community problems
- **Community Awareness**: Increased awareness and engagement in learning about community issues
- **Self-Awareness**: Increased self-confidence in having a positive impact on the community
- **Career Identity**: No change in career direction or intention to pursue a career that serves others in need
- **Experiential Learning**: No change in one’s opinion about the learning value of connecting course content to real-life situations
However...

- Observed outcomes were statistically significant but further tests showed they were not large enough to be meaningful.

- Observed outcomes could not be causally linked to the service learning experience per se.
Why didn’t we get stronger results?

- Students already possessed positive attitudes toward civic engagement
- Pre-formed, socialized attitudes may be resistant to significant change
- Wrong things or not enough of the right things were assessed
- Possible disconnect exists between instructional priorities (learning subject matter) of faculty and program goals (promoting positive attitudes toward civic engagement/solving community problems)
- Impact measures (regressed gain scores) were probably unreliable
- Course start-up problems (e.g., student placements, special requirements, schedule conflicts) limited exposure time to the experience
Re-thinking our Research Approach: Quantitative to Qualitative

- Define/explore broader range of outcomes
- Achieve more depth and detail from subject perspective
- Focus on process as well as outcomes
- Develop a more informed causal analysis of program outcomes
- Create a research framework for assessing diverse community action projects
Qualitative Research on SIA Projects

- **Subjects:** 22 students on 4 campuses
- **Pre-SIA video-conference group interviews and post-SIA personal interview with brief questionnaire**
- **Areas assessed:** Knowledge, Skills/Abilities, Interests, Attitudes/Feelings
- **Analysis:** descriptive/qualitative
**SIA Project Impacts: Personal Growth**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>Interests</th>
<th>Attitudes/Feelings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• General understanding</td>
<td>• Career</td>
<td>• Self-awareness</td>
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<td>• Complexity/scope of issue</td>
<td>• Social advocacy</td>
<td>• Compassion/empathy</td>
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<td>Skills/Abilities</td>
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<td>• Tolerance</td>
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<td>• Organization/management</td>
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<td>• Self-confidence and optimism</td>
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<td>• Communication</td>
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SIA Project Impacts: Change Process

• **Reinforcement** ("I am still basically the same person I was when I started the project, but in certain ways I have become both deepened and broadened.")

• **Developmental** ("Through the experience I have discovered something new and different about myself.")

• **Transitional** ("I am in transition, moving from one phase of my life to another.")

• **Transformative** ("I consider the impact of this experience to be a turning point in my life.")
In Conclusion…

- Development of two new assessment tools
  - Interview Guide
  - Questionnaire

- As we strive to assess the civic engagement outcomes of our students over time, the inherent variances in projects may result in cyclical assessment approach.
  - from Quantitative to Qualitative and back to Quantitative

- Previous assessments have revealed the changes that students have experienced in their knowledge, skills, interests and attitudes. New results describe the nature of the change process.
Q & A

- How do the outcomes that have come out of our research relate to the notions of civic engagement?
- What issues have you faced in doing assessment on your campus?
- Have you utilized quantitative or qualitative methods?
- What kind of information did you find most helpful?
- Did you use comparison groups in doing your assessment? What was your methodology?
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For more information about community service learning in the CSU visit: www.calstate.edu/csl