Long-term sustainability of service-learning programs: A ten year follow-up study of the Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation program

Amanda L. Vogel MHS
Department of Health Policy and Management
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

BACKGROUND

Service-learning (SL) in health professions education provides community-based training to students, and delivers health services in response to community-identified needs. SL may help train future health professionals in community health competencies, build capacity in community organizations, improve community health, and lay a foundation for community-academic partnerships for research and advocacy.

Endorsed by the IOM, Liaison Committee on Medical Education, and Pew Health Professions Commission, SL is growing in popularity in the health professions, and sustainability is being emphasized. But the benefits of SL for communities and schools have not been demonstrated. This may be due to a dearth of long-term evaluations. More research is needed to identify whether SL programs are being sustained, and if so, whether they are achieving these goals.

RESULTS (continued)

2) Funding was important but not necessary for sustainability. However, it carried other benefits. Where SL had been incorporated into the curriculum during HPSISN, SL was self-sustaining without funding. But in other programs, external funding was essential to maintain SL when institutional funds were tight. External funding had other benefits, providing “instant credibility.”

3) Program leadership and support from three levels: student advocates, program champions, and supporters among top administrators.

Q: “What do you think have been the most important factors to facilitate sustainability of the [SL] program in particular?”

A: “The most important [is]… the quality and doggedness of… many of the faculty who got engaged in service-learning a decade or so ago. Those are the people who have really supported the service-learning coordinators that help the faculty to not see it as an outlier, when [they]’re seen as really solid top notch faculty.”

4) An institutional commitment to community service, due to either: - a mission to serve the people of the region (land grant or rural institutions), - explicit institutional values (faith based institutions), or - social justice priorities, e.g. eliminating disparities.

“In addition, a normative match between the values of the school and the community partner organizations supported sustainability.”

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

SL appears to be a sustainable pedagogical method in the health professions. Malleable factors, such as leadership and the ability to adapt to changing health priorities, were important influences on program sustainability. But it appears that schools with a strong institutional culture that support SL have an advantage for sustaining SL, as well as schools with university-level community-engagement infrastructure. These factors may be harder to change, although SL programs, themselves, may help to shift institutional culture. The policies of funding agencies and accreditation and credentialing organizations are also key influences on sustainability. These, too, may be affected by trends in the field.

SL programs that are able to capitalize on both the internal academic environment and broader conditions seem best able to remain sustainable over time.

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