

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

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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.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To assess the long-term sustainability and impact of SL programs in the health professions,
- 2) To identify key influences on these outcomes, and
- 3) To develop a conceptual framework for SL program sustainability and impact.

This poster highlights findings related to program sustainability.

METHODS

Study Design: A ten year follow-up study of the Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN) demonstration program. From 1995 to 1998, HPSISN supported the development of community-academic partnerships for SL, and the integration of SL into the curriculum in 17 health professions institutions.

This research uses an embedded comparative case study design. The first phase consisted of an overview of the sustainability and impact of HPSISN at all participating schools, and factors that influenced these outcomes. The second phase will consist of an embedded comparative case study of three SL programs with unique experiences of sustainability and impact, to explore in depth the pathways to these outcomes.

Data Collection: Phase 1 data collection consisted of in-depth telephone interviews with HPSISN principal investigators at 16 of the 17 schools. Phase 2 data collection will consist of site visits, interviews, and document analysis.

Data Analysis: All phase 1 interviews but one were tape recorded and transcribed. Qualitative content analysis was used to identify key themes. Both open and closed coding were used.

RESULTS

SUSTAINABILITY:

- 15 of 16 programs continued 10 years after HPSISN ended
- Two models of SL emerged:
 - 1) SL was mandatory and incorporated into required coursework, or
 - 2) SL was voluntary, incorporated into electives and internships, and incentivized with recognition programs
- Two levels of sustainability were present:
 - Routinization:** SL operates only at the course level, faculty maintain partnerships, no advisory board, no special funding
 - Institutionalization:** SL coordinated by SL center, with hard money, full time staff; center maintains partnerships, hosts advisory board, and evaluates program; institution provides technical assistance and other resources to faculty and external groups
- Most programs did not expand or lead to spin-offs, both hallmarks of sustainability, and explicit aims of HPSISN.

INFLUENCES ON SUSTAINABILITY:

Six key influences on program sustainability emerged:

- 1) **The existence of infrastructure at the level of the school or university to support community-academic partnerships, or to support student service.**

"They [at the center for community engagement] have really been the major financial supporter [of faculty development around service-learning]... and they've been the ones that have supported the service-learning coordinators that help the faculty to not be overwhelmed with the service-learning portion of their course."



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. These are people for the most part who are highly respected faculty members, junior faculty members all the way up to some very, very senior people. ... You get that core of people who just believe in the value of service-learning and they tend to influence others, particularly... when they are not seen as outliers, [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.

"There are a lot of expectations on the part of this campus to serve the people of [the state], that come out of the governor's office, the legislature and elsewhere."

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

Our institution is "somewhat unique... in that it had a Jesuit tradition, and the community we were involved with had a religious sort of foundation to it, in terms of the community organizations we linked with. So it was a very good match."

- 5) **Broader academic trends, including accreditation criteria, classification systems, and changing attitudes about the role of academic institutions in the community.**

"There's been a sea change -- and that's the right word -- in attitudes about service-learning since the beginning of the HPSISN grant. ... The barriers to creating SL courses that we faced so dramatically ten years ago, we don't see that anymore. ... Chairs and deans... are very supportive of service-learning, and that was absolutely not the case a decade ago. ... Junior faculty feel a lot freer now than they ever did... to take the time to implement service-learning. ... There is at minimum a tolerance of service-learning that didn't exist and at... best, in many places on both sides of campus -- academic affairs and health affairs -- there is an active sort of encouragement or sort of rewarding for doing it."

- 6) **Ability to adapt to changing institutional, local and national health priorities.**

"You know, being relevant is the most important thing you could do [to sustain a service-learning program]. I mean being relevant in the community and being relevant with what's going on in the institution in terms of education. ... Everything is changing all the time, so you can't just sit on your laurels, you've got to continue to grow and change if you're going to... have a meaningful part in education and in community."

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 of service have an advantage for sustaining SL, as do 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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