Project Title Measuring the Long-Term Effects of Service-Learning on Calvin College Alumni

Project Abstract

Ernest Boyer’s College: The Undergraduate Experience in America (1987); Pascarella and Terenzini’s How College Affects Students (1991); Alexander Astin’s What Matters in College (1993); and Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt’s Involving Colleges (1991) all made bold and positive research-based claims regarding the way the undergraduate experience changes the lives of students. By 2010, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa were asking for serious reform in higher education in their book, Academically Adrift, hinting with their provocative subtitle that there was “limited learning on college campuses.” The question of how college, understood broadly to include formal classroom as well as informal and co-curricular learning, affects, changes, helps, develops, and teaches students to take their places as responsible, skillful, engaged citizens is one that matters deeply. This project seeks to take a step toward assessing long-term change as a result of a program or intervention.

Calvin College’s mission is to equip students to think deeply, act justly, and live wholeheartedly as Christ’s agents of renewal in the world. To that end, various campus offices and departments, particularly those that facilitate student programs, should identify learning and development outcomes that augment that mission. Common practice is to conduct evaluation and assessment that occurs during and/or immediately after a program or intervention. Through this practice, program facilitators gain an understanding of the immediate outcomes. However, that a student identifies or demonstrates immediate progress toward intended outcomes does not prove that the change will be long-lasting or permanent.

Utilizing historical records of participation and leadership, this project will use the Service-Learning Center as a case study to assess the long-term effects of student programs. The student researcher will conduct a review of literature to better understand the current work in outcomes assessment in higher education. She or he will review various survey instruments to select and/or create an instrument that will assess various embodiments of the intended learning and development outcomes of service-learning programs.

Through an analysis of records, she or he will attempt to identify a pool of Calvin College alumni for whom service-learning is an identified experience during their time as a student at Calvin. Using a survey instrument, and follow up interviews for a select sample, the project will develop statistical correlations between participation in specifically-identified service-learning programs and experiences (i.e. academically-based service-learning, Spring Break service-learning trips, StreetFest, etc), and clearly identified life commitments, skill sets, or civic involvement (i.e. voting habits, church leadership, holding elected office, among other forms of civic engagement). Finally, the researcher will conduct a thorough analysis of the survey and interview results and write a report of her or his findings.

The benefit of this study lies both in its findings (understanding which programs/activities yield long-term change in specified learning and development outcomes), and its process (determining an effective strategy for assessing long-term impact of student programs).

Project The outcomes of this project may be immediately beneficial to the Service-Learning Center,
Outcome as it may utilize the results to consider the strengths and weaknesses of its various programs. The project should also benefit various college constituents, including academic departments and student life offices, who may be able to replicate a version of this study for their own programs.

This project will also hold value in the national conversation about service-learning outcomes and assessment in higher education.