Service-Learning Scholars Focus Group
Bennion Center
2/27/2009

Participants: 11
Gender: 4 Female, 7 Male

Also present: Jim Asbrand (facilitator), JaNae Lilly (observer, notes)

**Question 1:** How do you feel about the quality of your service-learning classes and does it seem to make a difference if it’s a requirement of the course vs. an optional service-learning section?

**Major Themes:**
- Service-learning components of courses need to be explicit so students know what is required when registering.
- Different types of students sign up for required vs. optional service-learning courses and the type of students change atmosphere of class.
- Required or fully-integrated service-learning courses:
  - Help introduce/promote service-learning to new students who would not otherwise seek service opportunities and students who take required service-learning courses continue to engage in service.
  - Draw faculty and students who are more engaged/dedicated due to the structure (deadlines), and direct application of service to curriculum.
- Optional/Opt-in service-learning courses
  - Can cause students to feel isolated in individual service work.
  - Are necessary because of students’ busy schedules and provide a less stressful alternative.
- All students reported high quality in the majority of service-learning courses they have taken.
- Students report that the attitudes, interests and knowledge of faculty regarding service-learning are essential components in assuring the quality of service-learning courses.
- Students state the size of the class as well as having a single issue/service focus correlate to greater quality.
**Question 2:** How involved was your faculty in facilitating/managing the service-learning partnerships and reflection activities and how prepared did they seem to be to lead/facilitate reflection discussions (i.e., level of empathy, knowledge of service-learning objectives, ability/willingness to share personal service experiences)?

**Major Themes:**

- Students reported smaller classes and faculty personal involvement in service allowed for better connection to the faculty and better reflection activities.
- Students felt that the use of different methods/modalities for reflection activities (film, art, audio, writing, blogging, etc.) was necessary.
- Students stated that most faculty had good skill/ability to lead reflections/discussions and that TAs experience directly correlated with skill in this area.

**Question 3:** How strong was the partnership between your service-learning faculty and the community partners and do you feel the community partner’s needs were met?

**Major Themes:**

- Students stated that the strength of partnerships varied depending on instructor experience, size of class, and size of partner list.
- Students reported that when there was not a strong faculty/partner connection, it was difficult to report back but led to increased student growth and responsibility, and better connections between student & partner.
- Students reported that partners’ needs were met when there was a strong faculty/partner connection, and when students were more proactive.
- Students provided suggestions to ensure partners’ needs were met including:
  - Having a detailed job description for each partner
  - Having a clear agreement/contract between partners needs and student needs/interests
  - Having partners come in to inform/present to students.

**Question 4:** How explicit were your faculty in teaching civic engagement and responsibility to the community?

**Major Themes:**

- Students reported varying degrees of explicit instruction on civic engagement and responsibility to the community from fairly integral to no mention of either. The degree of integration seemed to depend on the passion of the faculty member and the applicability to main course content.
• Some students reported using a textbook “Learning Through Service” which incorporated these ideas well and stressed service beyond college.

• Students stated that in opt-in service learning sections, these issues were only discussed in discussion sections with TAs.

• Students stressed the importance of emphasizing civic engagement integration to service-learning faculty.

**Question 5: How would you improve the service-learning classes?**

**Major Themes:**

- **Faculty**
  - Market/promote service-learning more heavily to faculty across campus.
  - Inform present and future service-learning faculty of resources/tools available through the Bennion Center for courses.
  - Institute a mentoring program for new service-learning faculty.
  - Provide forum for service-learning faculty across campus interact to help promote service-learning classes and develop service-learning curriculum.
  - Address apparent disconnection between faculty and students regarding objectives of service-learning classes.
  - Encourage service-learning faculty to address the interests/passions of students in service-learning classes.
  - Have service-learning faculty help market to other faculty members within their departments/colleges.

- **Students**
  - Market/promote service-learning more heavily to students so they are more aware of service-learning opportunities.
  - Focus on increasing awareness of service-learning especially in engineering/science (non-humanities) departments.
  - Increase awareness of general service opportunities at Bennion Center.
  - Start exposing/marketing service-learning to new students early in their college career.

- **Departments**
  - Work with departments/majors to incorporate service-learning courses into major requirements. This could make use of service-learning add-on sections.
  - Develop more service-learning classes in math/sciences.
  - Market/promote service-learning as a hands-on/practical experience and application of learned skills (emphasize the value of praxis).

- **Curriculum**
  - Increase focus on applying and connecting service to education – establish partnerships using curriculum-based skills.
o Develop service opportunities that are directly applicable.
  o Re-evaluate reflection components and how to demonstrate/process service-learning experiences (different modalities – audio journal, art projects, etc.).
  o Link reflections to individual students’ passions and learning styles.
  o Connect service–learning classes more directly to Bennion Center.

*A few participants had to leave early and were not present for the last two follow-up questions.*

**Question 6 (follow up): How useful were the Service-Learning Coordinators in facilitating the service-learning partnerships and reflection activities?**

Most students present were not familiar with the position of Service-Learning Coordinators. A few students had limited experience with Service-Learning Coordinators. These students felt that while Service-Learning Coordinators could be helpful to faculty, they were not aware of how the position affects students.

**Question 7: How prepared were your community partners to work with service-learning students to meet the learning objectives of the course?**

Students reported that although there was a wide range of experiences with community partners, most were simply prepared to receive volunteers to do work, and were not closely connected to the course except when a previous relationship existed with professor. Students perceived that community partners considered it primarily the course instructor’s responsibility to teach and reflect on service/civic engagement.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- For future focus groups, it may be helpful to schedule a larger block of time in order to accommodate students arriving late and settling in before starting with questions.
- It may also be helpful to provide students with a copy of the focus group questions to refer to during the focus group in an effort to maximize time.
- Participating students all seemed to report overwhelmingly positive experiences in service-learning courses.
- Students seem to perceive a number of distinct qualitative differences between those service-learning courses in which the service aspect is fully integrated (service required of all enrolled students) and those courses in which the service aspect is optional or add-on. These differences include level of integration of service and civic engagement into curriculum, knowledge and dedication of instructor in regards to service principles, attitude of students toward service, and relevance of service opportunities. Some students do, however acknowledge the practical importance of add-on service-learning courses in order to accommodate student schedules.
- Students also perceive a qualitative difference in service-learning courses taught by instructors with a personal history of service experience and those service-learning courses taught by
instructors with little to no service experience. Instructors with experience and personal commitment to service principles appear to establish a better, more meaningful connection with students, and appropriately integrate their personal service experience into the class reflections/discussions.

- Students identify experience as the primary factor contributing to instructors’/TAs’ skill in facilitating reflection activities.

- Students identified a need for developing increased awareness of both the availability and value of service-learning courses across campus, especially students/faculty in those colleges/majors that seem to be underrepresented in service-learning (hard sciences, engineering, etc.). Additionally, an emphasis on the opportunity for practical application of skills learned in other courses would be helpful in promoting service-learning classes.

3/26/09 ja. Approved sj