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Eckerd College's QEP: A Dynamic Program in the Age of Benchmarks

Abstract: Eckerd College, a liberal arts college with a focus on providing transformative learning experiences for students, has recently implemented a Quality Enhancement Program (QEP) which will increasingly expose students and faculty to service-learning. As service learning can necessarily be messy and challenging to implement, assessments must be in place to demonstrate that such a program is working and is worth continuing. This paper explores the ways in which Eckerd College intends to ensure student learning through reflection and assess a necessarily unstructured educational tool in an age of standardized goals and benchmarks. Findings indicate that uncertainties are built into Eckerd's QEP, but that these uncertainties are understood and accounted for according to the best available knowledge about service-learning in higher education.

Recently, Eckerd College went through the process of re-accreditation. In accordance with the requirements of this project, select members of the Eckerd College faculty were charged with developing a Quality Enhancement Plan ("QEP") which "is designed to strengthen student learning by enhancing reflective activities" (Eckerd College, 2010). The conception of this project was a collaboration between faculty and administrators requiring several years of planning and research across the educational disciplines. The end product is an initiative which draws on Eckerd's unique spirit and aims to transform student learning through service, an activity which becomes increasingly challenging as well as rewarding when in an academic context. The assumption of this initiative, based on abundant research, is that the special challenges associated with service learning will yield rewards which are similarly special – but how will one know if the program is successful? Planning stages for QEP development involved outlining "direct measures of cognitive service-learning outcomes" (Eckerd College, 2010). For any educational initiative, especially one stemming from a process like accreditation, there must be ways of determining efficacy. Students are precious and time wasted on techniques which fail to improve their learning is to the detriment of human society's future. With these high stakes, it makes sense that concrete criteria would be established to determine as accurately as possible within a reasonable time frame what sort of corrections need to be made to a teaching strategy. Also, in the age of No Child Left Behind and an increased focus on international competition in student achievement, there must be extra pressure to demonstrate student improvement in any program.

How might one fulfill these needs for solid benchmarks with a dynamic and variably structured program like service-learning? What outcomes might one expect from service learning, and how does one assign value to them? Which aspects of service-learning lend

themselves better to evaluation, and which are less suited for such concrete thinking? Returning to the idea of the QEP, how might Eckerd be uniquely suited for a service-learning based QEP? I intend to explore these questions in the context of Eckerd's specific history as well as more general studies on the place of service learning in academia, its specific challenges and rewards, and the various methods by which educators and administrators can evaluate its success in improving student learning. Ultimately I'd like to gain some understanding of how "despite the scarce documentation about their effectiveness, service-learning courses have continued to proliferate 'during a decade that has witnessed increased emphasis on assessment and accountability in higher education'" (Eckerd College, 2010).

Eckerd College is notable in one sense for its youth. Eckerd is old enough to have internal traditions and well established ties to the surrounding community, but young enough to make new initiatives seem appropriate and exciting rather than unmanageably uncertain. An understanding of its very beginnings as a college under a different name with somewhat different goals might help set the stage for why the current QEP is well-suited for this institution. Eckerd began its life as Florida Presbyterian College ("FPC") which admitted its first students in 1960 (Kadel Taras, 2008). A history of "The founding vision of Florida Presbyterian/Eckerd College" is available through the book *On Solid Rock* by Eckerd College Ford Scholar Stephanie Kadel Taras, the granddaughter of FPC's first president, Bill Kadel (Kadel Taras, 2008). Kadel Taras describes the formative years of FPC as strongly fueled by the "vision...of a learning community that tied together the life of the mind and the life of the spirit, that encouraged freedom with responsibility, [and] that combined intellectual rigor with moral development" (Kadel Taras, 2008). The founders of FPC/Eckerd were not explicitly interested in service-learning or entirely shattering the mold of higher education – "in the later 1960s and 1970s, FPC's curriculum

wavered between innovative, nontraditional approaches and a tendency toward the status quo in higher education” (Kadel Taras, 2008). In the very first years there was a sense that they could go anywhere and do anything, but teaching was still primarily done in the classroom and there was a grading scheme similar to the typical A-F scale (Kadel Taras, 2008).

However, revolutionary things did happen at FPC, and early faculty provided a profound example of living according to one's morals when FPC's Board of Trustees voted not to admit a young man who would've been the first black student at FPC. Many faculty members were deeply upset by the Board's decision, and in order to provide “evidence that an emergency situation exists so that [the president] could call a special meeting of the Board to reconsider its action...all but two members of the faculty resigned” (Kadel Taras, 2008). Their actions got results, and though too late to admit the student who had sparked the controversy, their bravery demonstrated that educators at FPC were willing and able to stand apart from tradition if that was the right thing to do. A reporter remarked to Bill Kadel during that time of turmoil, “you don't mind standing alone do you” (Kadel Taras, 2008). Indeed he did not, and that independent drive to do “not...what you should do, but...what you *must*” is perhaps the most important evidence that FPC/Eckerd could become an excellent school for service-learning (Kadel Taras, 2008).

It may also be important to discern the general qualities of service-learning, especially within higher education. Because it does not fit into the typical classroom education model, it is still considered somewhat specialized – Jeffrey Howard states that “there is a widespread misperception in academic circles that community service is a ‘soft’ learning resource” (Howard, 2001). Clayton and Ash (2004) describe in detail the discomfort that can be associated with service-learning for students and educators alike. Much of this discomfort stems from a common source: Independence. Clayton and Ash (2004) admit “it is well known that students face

difficulties transitioning from traditional instructor-centered pedagogies to those that require greater learning responsibility” (Clayton & Ash, 2004). Learning that takes place outside the school building cannot always be overseen by a professor. This is valuable. However, “service-learning instructors may fear giving up control over what and how our students are learning” (Clayton & Ash, 2004). Students may also have trouble accepting the new paradigms in service-learning: they may “[see] feedback on reflection products as ‘teachers’ games’ ...and [attribute] the messiness of encounters with ambiguous and complex ‘real world’ issues to instructor disorganization or poor course design” (Clayton & Ash, 2004).

Jameson et al. (2010) also provide careful and thorough definitions of service-learning, or as they call it, “community-engaged scholarship”. Taking into account many previous studies’ definitions of community engagement and scholarship, they define community-engaged scholarship as “scholarly activities related to research and/or teaching that involve full collaboration of students, community partners, and faculty as co-educators, co-learners, and co-generators of knowledge and that address questions of public concern” (Jameson et al., 2010). Further, service-learning/community-engaged scholarship is based on “democratic civil engagement” which “positions all partners as co-educators, co-learners, and co-generators of knowledge” (Jameson et al., 2010). This structure is “highly counter-normative” - traditional academic hierarchies are “technocratic” in that “those without academic credentials and degrees are treated as clients with problems to be solved” rather than co-creators of learning (Jameson et al., 2010). Not all educators are well-suited for this type of “counter-normative” learning, nor are all students. The level of ingenuity it requires to properly take advantage of service learning is impressive, and the type of thinking involved is distinct from what probably makes up the majority of a student’s or educator’s academic life. Clayton and Ash (2004) agree with other

researchers, however, that traditional “emphases on efficiency, answer orientation, [and] assumption of teacher (not learner) responsibility for establishing goals...does not adequately prepare learners for the rapidly changing, unpredictable, interconnected temporary world” – thus it is for the better to work through the difficulty of transcending traditional modes of learning (Clayton & Ash, 2004).

There is substantial information in the literature about how one might best implement service-learning in an academic context beyond a defense of its right to exist there at all. Howard has written ten “principles of good practice for service-learning pedagogy” which provide a basic outline for success in teaching with service. Clayton and Ash (2004) as well as many others have also presented insightful ideas about what service-learning should look like and what happens when it is implemented. It’s clear that there must be more to discuss between educators and students than how many hours of service are being performed, but one can find few concrete guidelines to easily define what these discussions should contain. Each student’s experience will be different and lessons will not always dovetail in the logical and organized fashion of a professor’s lecture. Again, service-learning is “messier, more self-critical, and more open-ended than most students-or most instructors-have been socialized into” (Clayton & Ash, 2004). The drive to explain how instructors might implement strategies to deal with the cognitive and emotional dissonance associated with service-learning is strong, as its previously mentioned difference from traditional education can make it easy to discount due to unmanageable difficulty. Proving that the outcomes of service learning are worthwhile is also very important – how else might some very traditional education institutions justify attempting it?

And now we reach the final and most challenging question, to my mind: how do we know it’s working? How does one measure transformative learning? If one necessarily does not

know what a student will become after his or her experience with service learning, how can one anticipate any result well enough to create a rubric? If students start from varying levels of maturity and academic talent, how might one standardize the amount of transformation that is necessary to merit "success"? Clayton and Ash (2004) once again have important insights into success in service-learning:

Service-learning challenges us to view success differently. "Success" not only includes making a big impact on a lot of people but also touching a few people deeply and sometimes in ways that do not emerge immediately...Rather than diving in and trying to institute large changes immediately, we can focus on making several small changes that combine over time to create the larger change that we envision. Achievement of the 'big picture' may seem delayed or discarded as a result of focusing on the smaller, short-term aspects of our service, but this is not necessarily the case.

This is a challenge indeed. If success in service-based learning is as variable as the students' experiences within it, and if it demands such patience in achieving long-term goals, then meeting typical benchmarks within typical timelines may not be feasible. The reality of introducing service-learning into a curriculum is that it will upset the educational process on several levels. A student might make obvious strides in math comprehension within an academic year but take much longer to make significant, observable improvements in achieving the values desired by service-learning instructors.

More recent findings by Clayton and Ash (2009) describe the problems which come from shallow learning within community service. They caution that "experiential learning can all too easily allow students to reinforce stereotypes about difference, to develop simplistic solutions to

complex problems, and to generalize inaccurately based on limited data” (Clayton & Ash, 2009). The need to accept small changes as “success” in service-learning can allow for a lack of depth which can actually harm a student’s development as a sensitive member of global society. The effort not to rush understanding or impose structure which might stifle student growth may allow some students to maintain a minimum of effort or simply fail to develop the skills to truly reflect on what they’re doing. Their examples are telling: “The service-learning student...may think that all food assistance programs function exactly like the one at which he is working, causing him to make sweeping generalizations about the effectiveness of such programs...[and] the intern who finds her collaborative project frustrating may end up repeating patterns of poor teamwork in her next group project” (Clayton & Ash, 2009).

If students do not develop awareness of the challenges they face or the insights they can gain from them while performing service in an academic context, there may not be any learning from that service. They miss out on “[developing] the meta-cognitive skills required for lifelong, self-directed learning that applied learning is so well suited to cultivate” (Clayton & Ash, 2009). Luckily, there are some strategies to strengthen the service-learning experience such that it still produces appreciable improvement without compromising the non-traditional, unstructured aspects of service. Clayton and Ash (2009) put much stock in reflection. They quote findings which essentially state that superior learning is positively correlated with strength of reflection (Clayton & Ash 2009).

This is a good point to mention the slogan repeated around Eckerd College’s campus to sum up the QEP: “Serve. Reflect. Learn”. Students have been given free buttons and t-shirts with these words on them, and campus computers are set to repeat this message as a screen-saver. Clearly, Eckerd is also relying on reflection to ensure that the service aspect of the QEP actually

translates into learning and not the shallow generalizations described in Clayton and Ash's warnings. Surveys of faculty opinion on service learning during the QEP development period in the fall of 2009 indicated that those faculty already implementing service-learning in their courses "required a reflective component in their classes" and strongly believed that service enhanced student learning (Eckerd College, 2010). Reflective components were primarily whole class or small group discussions, written reports, journals and oral reports (Eckerd College, 2010). The details of QEP development involve an extensive literature review in order to define the advantages of and precedent for integrating service-learning into the curriculum, what actually constitutes service-learning, and the ways in which reflection must be used to ensure "meaningful learning" (Eckerd College, 2010). The developers of the QEP found that "service-learning researchers and practitioners universally acknowledge the importance of incorporating structured reflection so that students may derive optimum benefit from service-learning; however, these experts also recognize the inherent difficulties of developing, integrating (and assessing) reflection activities for service-learning courses" (Eckerd College, 2010).

Indeed, Clayton and Ash (2009) note that "the word [reflection] itself frequently connotes stream-of-consciousness writing, keeping a diary, or producing a summary of activities". They describe that some associate it with "'touchy feely' introspection, too subjective to evaluate in a meaningful way and lacking in the rigor required for substantive academic work (Clayton & Ash, 2009). The major argument they present is that critical reflection "*generates...deepens...and documents* learning (producing tangible expressions of new understandings for evaluation [authors' italics]" (Clayton & Ash, 2009). This is of primary interest in the context of evaluating the worth of a program – what are these tangibles? In the case of Eckerd's previous experiences with service learning, they are discussions and papers.

Those faculty and administrators designing the QEP understand the issues in assessing such products: they cite studies stating that “most research on service-learning outcomes relies on the least convincing measure to faculty considering implementing service-learning in their courses, self report” (Eckerd College, 2010). Also, Eckerd’s past experiences with service-learning have not “identified or adopted a common set of measures to assess the effects of... service and reflection on student learning outcomes” (Eckerd College, 2010). This is a primary goal of the new QEP.

Moving into the actual realm of assessing the learning which results from implementing the QEP, Eckerd College has outlined some basic strategies for determining success in the program. In the classroom, “Individual Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATS)” will be used by faculty implementing service-learning into 15 new service-based courses (Eckerd College, 2010). The outline states that “a core subset of outcomes will be measured in every course; however, because of the different content, goals, and objectives in each new S-L [service-learning] course, not all outcomes will be measured in every course” (Eckerd College, 2010). The QEP direction and a committee on assessment will evaluate the data from the new courses and use them to evaluate areas for improvement annually (Eckerd College, 2010). It is the “Service-Learning Fellows” who teach the new courses that will “directly assess student learning outcomes using multiple measure of multiple dimensions of student learning” and use results to suggest improvements (Eckerd College, 2010). Material has been identified upon which to base assessments until June of 2015, the final year of the project. In order to best utilize reflection as a tool for effecting student learning, QEP courses will utilize “the DEAL model” originally described in Clayton and Ash (2009) which relies on a sequence of: “1) Description of experiences in an objective and detailed manner; 2) Examination of those experiences in light of

specific learning goals or objectives; and 3) Articulation of Learning, including goals for future action that can then be taken forward into the next experience for improved practice and further refinement of learning” (Eckerd College, 2010).

This is an ambitious program. Clearly, the bulk of literature on service-learning has been considered in developing Eckerd's QEP, and consideration has been given to Eckerd's unique history and individual position to interact with service-based learning outcomes.

My conclusions from the limited knowledge I've accumulated over my relatively few years in higher education are that Eckerd College is well suited for the independent and dynamic nature of service learning. It has already been featured in a book about colleges which “change lives” – a transformative journey, especially through service, seems like a natural thing to expect from an Eckerd education. However, there is little that the QEP development committee could have done to erase the uncertainties that made many faculty initially wary of integrating service-learning into their courses. Service-learning takes a lot of time and requires greater depth of faculty-student relationship than is typical in many traditional disciplines.

Ultimately, knowing whether or not the challenge has been worthwhile is not going to be easy. The DEAL model is sound and Fellows are certainly perceptive enough to create useful CATS to evaluate student work, but there is no way to standardize all of this. If service-learning had not clearly been popular in the last decade, I'd worry that a lack of clear standards would make this program unpopular and possibly alienate potential donors. However, it seems that most institutions accept the worth of service-learning despite its refusal to fit within traditional assessment schemes. This faith is impressive: despite an increased focus on standards and assessments, the higher education community embraces service-learning as a tool that is worth the time, money and effort required to productively implement it. This implies that the desire for

students to confront diversity and critically reflect on their own learning is stronger than the urge to optimize efficiency in education or the fear that such dynamic programs are too unstructured to guarantee student success. This is promising, and bodes well for Eckerd's QEP.

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