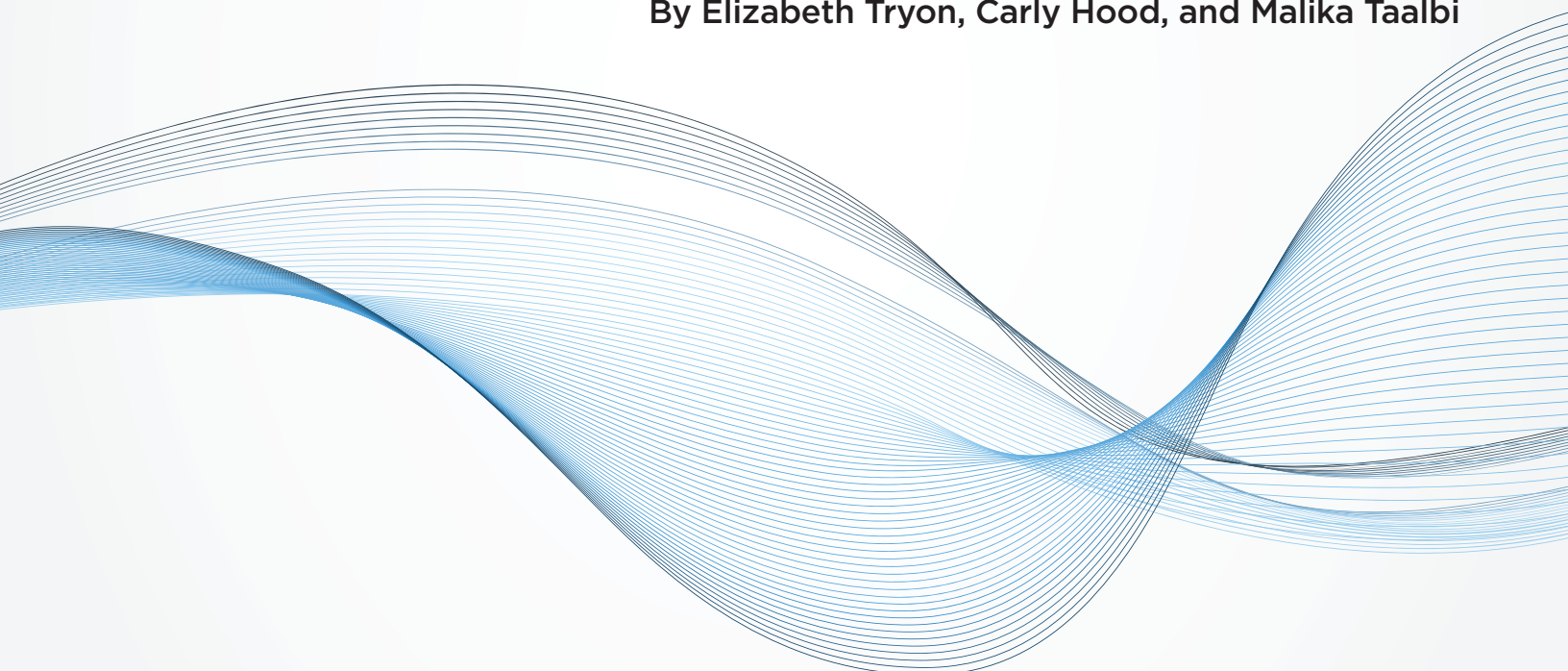




EXAMINING INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

for Global Service Learning and Community-Based Research

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There is a spectrum of authenticity in global academic exchange that service learning and other forms of community engagement can enhance. Frequently in study-abroad programs, U.S. students live, go to class, and socialize mainly with their U.S. peers, thereby missing out on the potential impact that immersing themselves more fully in the host culture could provide (Magnan, S. & Bank, M., 2008; Isabelli-Garcia, C., 2006; Citron, J, 2002; Gmelch, 1997). While the practice of global service learning and community-engaged research has risen as an alternative for deepening student experience and cultural understanding, accompanying that increase in practice comes an examination of methods and impact on the host communities.

Structures and Methods

To find out more about institutional structures and processes in place for international service and research, University of Wisconsin-Madison representatives of [The Research University and Civic Engagement Network](#) (TRUCEN), of the national [Campus Compact](#) coalition, administered an informal survey on international community engagement practices at their annual meeting in 2012. Seventeen of the twenty-one “Research I” institutions in attendance responded to the survey, which revealed several commonalities:

- Thirteen of the respondent institutions have some type of formalized framework in their own area to engage students in global service learning, yet only three of these schools work closely with the school’s international or study abroad departments to follow consistent standards.
- Five respondents use an institution-wide definition for service learning or community-based research. Most schools, however, have a definition understood only within their unit or department.
- To handle issues of risk and liability, fourteen of the seventeen survey respondents contracted the process of “vetting” these programs out to an international studies unit or worked through a centralized combination of their international departments and offices of risk management. No school in the survey had an independent formal process for handling or scrutinizing liability and risk issues.
- Ten schools had an evaluation process in place for capturing student experiences in these global service programs. The schools reported a variety of evaluation methods, such as “field liaisons report via field notes and end of year evaluation forms,” “reflection assignments,” and “student symposia.” Only two schools reported an effort to measure community impact, or to gather feedback from the community. These evaluations were based primarily on student surveys. Two schools indicated using evaluative surveys that incorporate a community feedback component, and one communicated use of qualitative and quantitative data and student symposia in the evaluation process.

The survey also asked respondents to rank the following five factors in order of relevancy when developing a successful global service-learning program:

- having a streamlined process in place to support new programs;
- faculty/staff network of shared global partners;
- grants for faculty/staff travel;
- strong link to study abroad programs;
- joint faculty/community buy-in.

The top three ranked factors for each participant were then reviewed for frequency and preference. “Joint faculty and community buy-in” received the highest total score in relevance and was tied with “having a streamlined process” for highest frequency of mention. Interestingly, however, all five factors were ranked in the top three in relevancy with nearly identical frequency; that is, when participants chose the top three most relevant factors to them, all five factors were ultimately rated nearly equally as “relevant” or “highly relevant.” This variety in prioritizing the top choices helps explain the survey’s overall conclusion that there is a general absence of formalized institutional frameworks—including definitions—for global service-learning or community-based research. Meaning specifically, individual units and centers may have standards or frameworks in place to engage students, but the process and definitions are not emphasized or standardized on an institutional level. It is possible that the differing levels of engagement are due to the variety in opinions over what factor is most relevant in developing a successful program. A lack of institutional definitions of service learning, however, may create tension in making decisions about what processes to follow and can delay a campus-wide consensus.

In additional qualitative feedback, respondents also indicated the importance of having a strong faculty

and academic connection to the programs. Responses included: “faculty content sponsor,” “strong tie to academic curriculum,” and “a tie...to specific skills and disciplinary forms of knowledge.” Additionally, a “pre-departure and re-entry training process,” a reciprocal relationship between university and community, and a focus on “sustainability” were also noted as important factors to consider.

We have noted empirically that many service-learning opportunities arise organically from pre-existing relationships between individual faculty or departments and individuals or partner organizations in other countries. One faculty colleague spoke of her long-term research stemming from a pen-pal correspondence with a woman in Kenya that was part of a literacy project, which has spawned a large grant-funded women’s health research and malaria-prevention initiative involving students who travel to Kenya on a yearly basis and move the work forward with local partners. Another found herself on vacation in Ecuador and made friends with townspeople who discovered she was a water researcher. She now takes graduate and undergraduate students there each summer to work in the field on water quality research. When all parties are comfortable with the scope and terms of the arrangement, as they can be through these long-term relationships, outcomes can be very rewarding to both academia and the community.

Implications

What do these findings reveal about the challenges, significance, and needs of globally-engaged learning and U.S. institutions? If a streamlined process to support new programs was listed as of high importance in the TRUCEN surveys, why are there few institutional structures that can oversee those processes? What then is the impact on the global partner and student learning outcomes?

Initial reviews of both the literature and website information of other colleges echoed the survey results in both a lack and disparity of formal institutional

frameworks for coordinated academic global engagement. It was outside the scope and timeframe of this piece to conduct a comprehensive review of higher education institutions in the United States; therefore, the authors focused on reviewing supplementary data from several of the TRUCEN schools that were not present at the time of the survey, as well as other examples that were identified during research.

This review supported the earlier conclusions found in the survey of a general absence of institutional frameworks supporting global service and engagement. The sample of programs demonstrated the variety of organizational structures and goals that the survey results also referenced. It was not immediately evident whether the programs reviewed had created standards that applied to institution-wide definitions or frameworks. Some schools, such as Georgetown University, did display a commitment to global engagement through value identification, but it was not clear whether that translated to an operational framework.

Duke University and North Carolina State University presented notable exceptions. At NC-State, the Board of Trustees approved a [Global Strategic Plan](#) in 2011. Its Office of International Affairs serves as the “University Center for Global Engagement” to support “global partnership linkages, promote international programs, plan and manage global activities, assist with academic planning for global knowledge/experience requirements, and provide logistical support for all international engagement on campus or abroad.” It houses a faculty advisory group to help identify regions or countries where programs could be linked to existing institutions abroad to expand sustainable partnerships. The website aggregates several research centers and offices that mention support for study abroad and global service-learning. The extent of cooperation among these departments or evidence of shared guidelines and definitions is not stated.

Duke University’s website presents the [Global Administrative Support](#) initiative, which provides

“easy access to the university-wide resources and policies that will allow Faculty, Staff and Students to plan and execute a successful international activity.” In addition, a program called “Duke Engage” provides opportunities for undergraduates to pursue immersive service experiences domestically and internationally. Further information-sharing with these programs would be valuable in gathering examples of good practices.

The increasing integration of academic structures with technology and innovative online learning techniques might provide support for innovative methods of developing global service learning, as well as cost-savings on international travel and lessening of “carbon guilt.” Through an Introduction to Global Studies Course at Winona State University, for example, students work with a global organization to conduct advocacy work through the Internet, without ever leaving Minnesota (Bowler, 2011). There is also a course at California State University-Monterey Bay that incorporates an optional direct service experience with the online engaged learning component.

In the absence of formal internal structures, many schools work with independent provider organizations such as [Amizade](#), [CIEE](#), [Global Service Corps](#), and [International Partnerships for Service Learning](#) to develop logistics, financing, communication, and safety guidelines for service-related work abroad. Some schools create academic partnerships with providers to add a curricular component, as in the case of the University of West Virginia and Amizade. Often, these partnerships with outside providers arise in locations abroad where the institution does not have an established program, particularly in developing countries (Redden, 2007). We cannot begin to evaluate the rigor or authenticity of these for-profit partners. Many of the same issues of measuring quality exist when using provider programs as when building one’s own; furthermore, as third-party formats vary widely, particular care must be used when dealing with both the genuineness of the experience and the safety of students.

As it is a difficult and comprehensive process for institutions to establish streamlined processes and formats for internationalized higher education, adding the extra service-learning component makes it more so. As anyone who has taken students on a service-learning trip abroad will likely report, there are whole new dimensions of responsibility and liability for administrators, faculty, and staff to consider. Due to this complexity, it is vital to begin focusing on the ramifications of many programs operating without any type of guidelines, official or not.

Many U.S. institutions have formalized engagement frameworks for their local engagement programs. Marquette University has had a service-learning office for 18 years. Many other schools including Stanford's Haas Center are in this now well-established field of domestic service learning and community-based research. While *local* service learning without intentional forethought and authentic mutual partnering can be more of a burden than a help to the community (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009), the potential for negative outcomes is compounded when students take this methodology abroad, especially to developing countries. For better or worse, students are acting as ambassadors for their school and their country (Mlyn & McBride, 2012). Faculty and academic staff working in these areas also require special professional development and support.

Practically speaking, there is another implication of the lack of coordinated student service delivery for this type of program: "supply chain" gaps in resources (the students and the funding) against the needs of respective communities, especially in developing countries. Isolated faculty doing valuable research abroad still cite frustration over requests for assistance that lie outside their area of expertise or discipline.

What Should We Be Doing About It?

Conversations are taking place in many institutions about addressing the need for guidelines in both

practical and cultural issue areas, and some have begun institutionalizing new practices. Just as it is important to follow good "community standards" for domestic community-based learning and research (Stoecker & Tryon, 2007), comprehensive or **standard guidelines of practice** can be lifesavers for students, and ensure better quality knowledge exchange in global initiatives. Most study-abroad programs have the usual litany of study-abroad requirements: inoculations, visas, medical histories, and required emergency contacts. For the additional component of working or volunteering in community settings abroad, the responsibility lies with the institution sending students into these settings. Processes that work well can be shared across units, and relationships with global communities can span disciplines. A few recommendations for good practice follow:

- Spending time up-front orienting students to the norms of the culture they will be interacting with is crucial, as is work on how to "behave" respectfully and with cultural awareness as an American emissary in those unfamiliar environments.
- Faculty and staff can benefit from workshops organized by other professionals with experience in global engagement, whether the faculty and staff are considering it for the first time or looking to improve quality and ease of program development.
- To mitigate frustration over coordinating multi-disciplinary or multi-institutional projects that help communities build capacity, global alliances of networks between communities and universities that are in communication and coordination with each other could be widely beneficial.

Collaboration as "Best Practice"

This notion of implementing a cross-campus infrastructure is already showing itself as a way to ensure good practice. UW-Madison's Wisconsin Without Borders (WWB) initiative, for example, draws on the history and values of both the [Wisconsin Idea](#),

attributed to UW-Madison Chancellor Charles Van Hise in 1904, and also to the many well-established global partnerships that faculty members and students have initiated. Facilitated in partnership by campus units The Morgridge Center for Public Service, the Global Health Institute, and International Academic Programs, WWB's mission for the last two years has been to foster an organizational culture that supports faculty and students in traversing disciplinary and geographic boundaries, allowing them to be responsible global citizens and effective global leaders by learning from each other's experience and collaborating when it makes sense.

Wisconsin Without Borders focuses primarily on credit bearing community-based learning and research. A joint learning community holds quarterly seminars to highlight case studies and give partners a space to collaborate and problem-solve as a peer group. A recurring topic of discussion is the concept of cultural understanding with global partners, and how to develop authentic partnerships that validate community wisdom. The advisory board is working on a glossary of shared definitions concerning global engagement practices, and exploring the compilation of a document of good practice in these methodologies. Sixteen "global field courses" were supported by grant funding in 2011, and seventeen were funded in 2012. Fundraising efforts are ongoing to establish a sustainable funding pool to encourage development of new globally engaged courses. Working in connection with the other TRUCEN schools, WWB hopes to foster more communication and collaboration throughout higher education across the globe.

Conclusions

The United States can benefit immensely from being mindful that other nations also have universities doing community-based work and research across borders. An outgrowth of the International Living Knowledge Network, the [Global Alliance for Community-Engaged Research](#) is a platform for creating

a worldwide "knowledge democracy." Recently given a UNESCO chair, its principles are listed in a Declaration on their website. In its vision, practitioners would be linked into a global network to "share effective practices in strengthening engagement of communities" (GACER, 2007). This could play out in boundary-less communication and collaboration across the globe. For example, if a community-based learning and research entity in an institution in Cape-town, South Africa receives a request for assistance from a civil society organization in an outlying community, but lacks the staff capacity to facilitate, the call could go out to the global network. That way, it could be possible to find a global program already in operation by another institution nearby, which may have faculty and students available to help.

Practical considerations for this vision will need to be addressed, of course. Community-based work is messier than bench research, whether local or global, though it is attractive and rewarding to many. Student learning outcomes can accelerate exponentially in these settings, as do the stressors and potential scariness of one's first experience abroad. If practitioners are prepared with good frameworks for practice, including strong back-up support systems, our global engagement activities will reach their full potential for capacity building abroad in mutually respectful partnership.

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