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Two-Volume Set Offers Sage Advice for Those Doing Research on Service-Learning

Reviewed by George L. Daniels

Research on Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Assessment: Students and Faculty. (IUPUI Series on Service Learning Research, Volume 2A). Patti H. Clayton, Robert G. Bringle, and Julie A. Hatcher, Editors. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2013, 337 pages. ISBN 978-1-57922-341-0

Research on Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Assessments: Communities, Institutions, and Partnerships. (IUPUI Series on Service Learning Research, Volume 2B). Patti H. Clayton, Robert G. Bringle, and Julie A. Hatcher, Editors. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2013, 332 pages. ISBN 978-1-57922-884-2.

Is there a right way or a wrong way to do service learning research? What are the necessary ingredients of a good study that adds something meaningful to the body of knowledge on experiential learning? Who should be the real beneficiaries of a solid piece of service learning scholarship? These are questions addressed in the *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* since the very first issue (Johnson, Johnson, & Shaney, 2008). Most recently, these are some of the questions the authors of a brand new two-volume set probe in their in-depth treatment and exploration of the field.

Part of the IUPUI Series on Service Learning Research, the two volumes of *Research on Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Assessment* were produced with the intent of improving service learning scholarship through strengthening its theoretical base. The volumes followed an initial book in the series that was dedicated to international service learning and produced by scholars in the Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis Center for Service and Learning. In Volume 2A the authors present eight chapters on service learning research related specifically to students and faculty. In Volume 2B, eight more chapters are devoted to community development and the institutionalization of service learning. The latter volume also devotes three chapters to conceptualizing and measuring the quality of various partnerships. Even though they were produced as a two-volume set, readers could purchase either volume and still get a complete experience, as both volumes open with the same two chapters defining the criteria for quality research.

Many of the authors who contributed chapters to both volumes, like the editors of the set, are a virtual “Who’s Who” in the field of service learning

and engagement scholarship. From Andrew Furco and Barbara Holland’s chapter on improving research on service learning institutionalization, to KerryAnn O’Meara’s treatment of faculty motivations for service learning, to Kevin Kecskes’ chapter on what an engaged academic unit should look like and Emily Janke’s how-to on advancing theory-based research on organizational partnerships, readers can be assured they are hearing from leaders in the field. However, that doesn’t mean newer or lesser-known scholars are excluded. Whether a leading scholar in the field or a researcher in the early stage in his/her career, the contributors all came together in 2009 in an IUPUI symposium. The result is an integrated set of chapters that complement one another in a way that is ideal for the service learning novice. In fact, this review is written from the perspective of one who is evolving as a service learning researcher and is seeking guidance on the best way to contribute to the body of knowledge in the interdisciplinary fields of service learning and civic engagement.

One of the biggest strengths of both volumes is that they assume nothing more than the reader’s desire to make such a contribution, starting with defining the very terms themselves—“service learning” and “research.” For something to be considered research, the authors say, a convergence of theory, measurement, design, and practice is required. Research, then, is not the same as evaluation because the former is conducted to generate or test theory, apply to practice, and contribute to knowledge for the sake of knowledge, whereas the latter is only a component of the process. Service learning research can be mistaken for program evaluation, which generally does not test theory and lacks generalizability because it is primarily concerned with the data and inferences from a single program or effort. How many times

have we seen a “study” on a service learning class that, while useful in the assessment of that course, was not really research, as these volumes make clear?

Another strength of Volume 2 is the depth of treatment on what some of the goals of our service learning research should be: impact on academic learning, influence on students’ civic learning, personal development, and intercultural competence. For example, in Communication and Diversity, a course this reviewer teaches, significant time is spent conceptualizing what it means to live and produce media messages in a diverse society.

Elsewhere, O’Meara (2010) has argued for a “new script” when it comes to reward systems for engaged scholars that are more public and more growth-focused. In a chapter in the first volume of this set, O’Meara reviewed the numerous studies on the motivations for faculty doing research on service learning and community engagement. The synthesis on this scholarship resulted in a conceptual model that includes inputs, processes, and outcomes of such research. Her analysis suggested that three common methods for research in the specific area of faculty reward system were quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and narrative analysis. New scholars in the field can take O’Meara’s analysis and not only situate themselves (and their own motivations for what they do) in the field, but also blaze a new path methodologically and conceptually in developing a research project. This shows how one can really put the chapters in these two volumes to work.

A couple of years ago, Kevin Kecskes, based on his decade in the provost’s office at Portland State University, acknowledged that engaged scholars have to wage our own public relations campaign to tell our story to those in our institution that engagement scholarship not only has to meet all the rigors of traditional scholarship, but also has to have applicable value and relevance to community or public issues while advancing disciplinary knowledge and public knowledge (Kecskes, 2013). Here in the second volume of *Research on Service Learning*, Kecskes outlines one way to start that public relations campaign by researching the academic department as a locus of change in the service learning and community engagement movement in higher education. By utilizing organizational change or institutional theory, one can show the key role of an academic unit in institutionalizing change toward community engagement. He noted that cultural theory can provide researchers with a framework to consider

the diversity of community-campus partnership-building arrangements.

For anyone seeking to conduct research or program evaluation on a service learning course, this *Research on Service Learning* two-volume set is a must-have for starting to conceptualize what the project will be. The completeness and currency of the volumes make either or both of them appropriate as a textbook for an engagement scholarship graduate course or a guide for research on civic engagement. Community partners interested in how academic research is done, especially on community-based research, could also benefit from *Research on Service Learning* as the writing is very accessible to the layperson.

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About the Reviewer

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