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what you measure is what you get Service Learning Can be Cost-Effective Way to Enhance Quality and Student Success

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What you measure is what you get

Service Learning Can Be Cost-Effective Way to Enhance Quality and Student Success

June 10, 2012

Note: This post connects to the conversational thread started here in March, which focused on sharing lessons and insights about leadership challenges faced by CAOs and other senior administrators as we seek ways to ease the tension between our goals for access, completion rates, and educational quality.

One of the most direct ways to enhance quality education is to promote a change in teaching philosophy from what faculty want to teach to what students need to learn.

Service-learning initiatives can accelerate this change in faculty approach to teaching and bring about the higher levels of student engagement and deeper levels of learning known to inspire students' sense of social responsibility and their degree completion.

Unfortunately, Service Learning, one of 10 High Impact Practices identified by AAC&U, is sometimes thought to be too expensive to adopt as a campus-wide requirement for all students. And, during difficult times, the offices that support service learning, may not survive the first round of budget cuts.

The result is that Service Learning often is encouraged on campuses, but relegated to the "optional" categories on degree planning sheets, despite what we know about the deep learning that comes from putting students in circumstances that increase the likelihood that they will experience diversity, develop practical problem solving skills, and become more culturally aware and socially responsible.

The good news is that Service Learning can be fully implemented without substantial financial investments. In fact, as an early adopter and service-learning champion, I discovered that once faculty evaluation systems begin rewarding faculty for incorporating Service Learning into their courses, a service-learning culture quickly evolves on campus. Sustaining this reward-based culture requires little additional funding beyond (a) professional development for the faculty and (b) a well-respected part-time faculty coordinator who champions the initiatives and uses student workers for office support.

Of course, it does not require much administrative courage or a financial investment to have the campus conversations that explain the impact of Service Learning on student outcomes — this is old news by now. A few cookies and a guest speaker with a power point presentation and you've got it covered.

On the other hand, getting Service Learning included as a key element in the evaluation of teaching does require campus leaders to be willing to invest their political capital in a conversation about evaluating faculty teaching, in part, on whether or not the faculty members incorporate techniques — like Service Learning and others — known to be high impact practices that produce learning outcomes. Because most campuses incorporate a "civic engagement" philosophy into their mission statements, the conversation can be grounded in an effort to ensure that course delivery (not content) is mission driven.

We know that enhancements to educational quality evolve more quickly at higher education institutions where campus leaders are willing to invest their personal stock in campus-wide conversations that result in improved definitions of teaching and evaluation systems that motivate faculty to include high impact practices in their repertoire of teaching strategies.

Because, as they say, what you measure is what you get.

So, why not be sure we are measuring teaching strategies we know will bring about quality and degree completion?

Jayne Marie Comstock