Where’s the Community in Service-Learning Research?

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The lack of research on the community dimensions of service-learning is a glaring omission in the literature. Analysis of the causes of this gap indicate that community-focused research is possible and desirable. This article presents a four dimensional model for doing research with community partners on the process and outcomes of community service-learning. The authors argue that the research should focus on the community-university partnership as the unit of analysis and that it should use a participatory action research approach.

“Where’s the community in service-learning research?” This was one of the major questions discussed by leading service-learning researchers and practitioners at a 1997 meeting convened by Campus Compact in Denver. The group’s discussion on strategic directions for service-learning research, as well as the authors’ conversations on the topic over the years, gave birth to the idea for this article.

Research related to the community represents a relatively recent direction in service-learning research. It is in this context that we focus on three matters. One is the need to understand why the service-learning research literature to date is almost devoid of research that looks at the community either as a dependent or independent variable. The second is that models for and approaches to service-learning research related to the community should adhere to the principle of reciprocity that is a fundamental principle of exemplary service-learning practice. And the third is that we must begin to develop questions, models, studies, and partnerships that will address this significant gap in the literature.

Why has there been so little research focused on “community” in the service-learning literature? The answers to this question are complex, and have political, intellectual, and practical dimensions. And while a comprehensive answer is beyond the scope of this article, there are several parts to the answer that are worth noting because they can inform future research on this topic.

The political dimension is probably the most obvious. Despite the rapid and widespread growth of service-learning research in the last decade, the vast majority of it is related to politically-charged concerns about academic rigor. As an emerging pedagogy whose advocates have opined a sense of marginalization since its beginnings, the demonstration of service-learning’s academic value has been the clarion call in research. In fact, most of the research during the 1990s has focused on student learning outcomes. Because research in general is the domain of the academy, the service-learning research agenda has been driven by academic concerns, not only about student learning but also about faculty perceptions of this pedagogy. Thus the focal question has been, “Where’s the learning in service-learning?” While this question has been most salient for answering service-learning skeptics, it also has been of concern to practitioners and ‘true believers’ (See Eyler & Giles, 1999). In addition, funders, seeking to document and evaluate their investments, have made student outcome research a priority in their grant-making.

The intellectual reasons for the paucity of service-learning research pertinent to community are complicated and are derived from American social and intellectual history related to the notion of “community.” As a result of progress-inducing inventions and trends such as the automobile, industrialization, suburbanization, and geographic mobility, the very idea of community in American life has been continuously challenged and modified. As early as 1927, John Dewey was writing about the loss of community in America (Dewey, 1946). In the fields of community studies and community development, the pursuit of research about community was largely replaced by discussion of the ‘eclipse of community’ (Stein, 1960) and attempts to redefine community in ways that locality was not the central theme (Warren, 1978). One of the outcomes of this debate was gen-