For faculty or staff seeking information on the how-to’s of service-learning, there are a good number of manuals and handbooks available. When I was first delving into the mechanics of service-learning course design, I became quite friendly with Campus Compact’s (Heffernan & Saltmarsh, 2000) Introduction to Service-Learning Toolkit, the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning’s (Howard, 2001) Service-Learning Course Design Workbook, and Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum (Battistoni, 2003). As I coached faculty during their forays into service-learning, I carried the second edition of the Toolkit with me seemingly everywhere. Of course, these sorts of toolkits were heavily shaped by the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education’s (Kendall & Associates, 1990) Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service, Volumes I and II, which predated my entry into service-learning, community engagement, and civic development.

As for compendiums of examples that faculty and staff can consult, Heffernan’s (2001) Fundamentals of Service-Learning Course Construction is frequently referenced for its six models of service-learning course structure. Zlotkowski edited the series, Service-Learning in the Disciplines (1997-2002), which gave prospective service-learning instructors hundreds of syllabi to use as models and bridges between the practice of service-learning and disciplinary concepts. More recently, The Service-Learning for Civic Engagement Set (Eismen, 2012) took a different approach to organizing examples, moving out of disciplines and arranging them by social issues. This approach speaks to the idea that public problems and issues cannot be holistically addressed through one, single disciplinary orientation.

Coming out this year, the SAGE Sourcebook of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement (Delano-Oriaran, Penick-Parks, & Fondrie, 2015) explores the practice of service-learning and various models for such programs, and the Handbook for Service-Learning and Community Engagement (Doignon, Eatman, & Mitchell) is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

With these resources available to help faculty and staff learn about service-learning, one might ask why Jacoby’s (2014) Service-Learning Essentials: Questions, Answers, and Lessons Learned is an important addition to the collection. I think the book is a particularly well-positioned contribution at this point in time. Jacoby cites the purpose of the book is to “define and promote high-quality service-learning, both to enable it to fulfill its promise and to serve as the foundation for advancing civic agency and engagement” (p. xvii). Jacoby’s text marries the presentation of the basic building blocks of service-learning pedagogy and what I see as the more critical issues dogging its future: a variant inclusion of civic and political learning dimensions, a set of assumptions about the environment of higher education that dictate a normative framing of community outreach and student characteristics, and a modest but growing critical research agenda that will help evolve and sustain service-learning practice. Higher education has been employing service-learning for long enough that a good how-to reference book must also include how-not-to, to-what-end, and forward-looking discussions. I think Service-Learning Essentials delivers those discussions briefly, albeit in the latter third of the book, and points readers to the works that explore such issues in greater depth. By including nuts and bolts information along with more purpose-driven and critical discussions, Jacoby has written a
text that brings together subjects typically bifurcated into beginners’ manuals and theoretical works. I think this is a service to the field of service-learning: From their first encounter, all practitioners of service-learning ought to be aware of its pitfalls as well as opportunities to realize greater goals than simply adopting a high-impact teaching method.

The book is also written so as to be helpful to a variety of audiences: faculty, staff, administrators, and field-builders. My own experience with service-learning has led me into each of these roles and so I found myself filtering its chapters through various objectives and it meeting those diverse objectives well (though I should note that my experience has been only with academic service-learning and so I likely bias academic insights rather than co-curricular). Jacoby organizes the text by grouping related questions into chapters. The effect of doing so creates a source that comprehensively includes the typical questions of those new to service-learning and also those questions that elevate and problematize service-learning. As a result, the book provides a rejoinder to the “I didn’t know what I didn’t know” quandary.

Perhaps most importantly, Service-Learning Essentials makes note throughout the chapters of the key works of scholarship, theory, and practice that pertain to service-learning at this point in time. Jacoby is well-suited to the task of crafting a comprehensive review, having been a mainstay scholar and practitioner of service-learning for decades. She has successfully walked the line of giving the reader enough context for each question and answer so that one has an understanding of the matter being discussed while also leaving a trail of breadcrumbs the reader can follow to learn more. I appreciated that the references were not simply aggregated into a concluding section within each chapter as a suggested reading list; rather, each reference is discussed briefly, in turn, and made relevant to the content of the respective chapter.

The introductory chapter provides the reader with the well-worn information of what service-learning is, why it is done, and its theoretical roots. Some of the information therein revisits information found in other toolkits and guidebooks, which could lead a reader who has just begun the book to conclude that it is another version of what already exists. I do hope the reader reads on, as there are two sections within this chapter I found particularly important to include in a very basic contextualizing of service-learning: a commentary on terminology and a summary of the history of service-learning. Jacoby notes that the word “service” is problematic for some and opens up the possibility of choosing alternate terminology, not just to accommodate particular institutional whims, but to more accurately portray the emphasis being paid to concepts such as citizenship and engagement with the community rather than service to particular individuals. The historical review is important because Jacoby includes the typical events such as the starting point at the Southern Regional Education Board; the development of key groups such as the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, International Partnership for Service-Learning, Campus Outreach Opportunity League, and Campus Compact; as well as the renewed civic focus of higher education in the 90s. Jacoby also includes within her history the reframing of community outreach to engagement with communities, the work done to promulgate civic learning, and the critical views of service-learning and its unintended negative consequences. It is crucial to include these latter developments as part of our history so that they can benefit our current practice context. I continue to be irritated by the trend to adopt a 1980s version of the pedagogy without drawing upon the insights gained from publications, discussions, and implementations that occurred throughout the 80s, 90s, and 2000s. For example, we need not discover the unintended negative consequences of service-learning anew as we have decades of experience and consideration upon which to draw.

The second chapter, “Understanding and Facilitating Critical Reflection,” firmly establishes critical reflection as the mechanism that animates learning within service-learning. Jacoby’s use of critical when describing reflection is done to call the reader’s attention to the central role reflection occupies in service-learning, how reflection helps students to develop critical thinking skills, the substantive emphasis on asking (and seeking answers to) critical questions that problematize situations that may appear simple, and to signify a critical orientation to service-learning that associates it with the pursuit of social justice. As is typical of the entire book, the questions Jacoby includes within this section have as much potential to instruct the practitioner new to reflection as it does to disabusing misperceptions they or others might have about critical reflection.

Chapter 3, “Developing and Sustaining Campus-Community Partnerships for Service-Learning,” states “… high-quality service-learning must be grounded in authentic, mutually beneficial campus-community partnerships” (p. 51) and so each of the questions helps the reader to understand the phenomena of community-campus partnerships through a series of benchmarks, guiding principles, models, and processes. Jacoby then introduces a number of pitfalls within partnerships that have missed the mark of mutual benefit or reciprocity. Though brief, there is a mention of the issues relevant to international service-learning partnerships, wherein the campus partner is in one country and the community partner
in another. I found the most compelling part of the chapter to be the last section in which Jacoby discusses how service-learning partnerships (that serve a service-learning class) might lead to more institutional-level partnerships. She summarizes work that differentiates transactional and transformational modes of partnership, with the latter typically focusing on outcomes that are “beyond the utilitarian” (p. 76). In my own research on democratically-engaged partnerships (Dostilio, 2014), I confirmed that one of the key conditions under which such partnerships emerge is that stakeholders of the partnership are galvanized by a shared civic issue rather than being driven by completing a project (or class) specific only to their own organization’s goals. That is not to say that all of their goals must be shared, but that there is a larger end that brings them together – addressing some sort of public problem.

It is at this point in the book that I began to realize that there may be an important discussion that has been overlooked. If we re-orient our engagement with communities to focus on greater goals (such as the civic development of students, realizing the justice mission of the university, or addressing pressing social issues) than completing a project or ensuring an opportunity for a particular teaching method, there will be instances in which service-learning is not the most useful vehicle to reach the desired goals. The concept of democratic engagement speaks to this: A democratically-oriented form of community-campus engagement is focused on public problem solving rather than endorsing or promoting a particular activity or pedagogy (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). Jacoby has written Service-Learning Essentials because she is interested in securing the future of service-learning. Given my own experiences, I think it is crucial that we not privilege service-learning as the only means to community-campus engagement or student civic development, or even position it as the most effective strategy all of the time. I am not suggesting that Jacoby seeks to privilege service-learning in these ways, but as is common with books that promote service-learning, it is the rare page dedicated to suggesting that service-learning is not the best tool in all situations.

Later in the book, Jacoby does raise the issue of institutionalization a number of times and discusses the merits and drawbacks, at one point citing Furco and Holland’s (2009) tipping point: “At this stage, the service-learning institutionalization work needs to shift away from supporting and promoting service-learning for its own sake to supporting and promoting broader, campus-wide initiatives that can be advanced by service-learning” (p. 57). The stage to which they refer is sustained institutionalization, the final stage within their model in which service-learning has become a well-understood tool for realizing institutional and community priorities. The de-emphasis of service-learning upon arrival in the final stage of institutionalization is not quite the same as the point I am making, but does make clear one aspect of the discussion: Overall, for institutions of higher education that are serious about engaging their larger communities and involving faculty and students in civic problem solving, service-learning is one tool that must be made available, supported, and institutionalized. However, it cannot be the only tool, and there are times when reading the literature supporting service-learning that one can have the impression it is being heralded as the Swiss army knife of community-campus engagement. This said, service-learning is arguably the most formalized pedagogy available to those who seek to engage teaching and learning with community problem solving. As such, Jacoby’s 4th chapter, “Integrating Service-Learning into the Curriculum,” holds a number of insights important to both a beginner and experienced service-learning practitioner.

Jacoby notes that due to its active learning focus and the way it promotes high engagement across student, faculty, and community stakeholders, service-learning provides students with a powerful learning experience. Many examples are given throughout the 4th chapter, ranging from descriptions of service-learning’s fit with specific disciplines to its fit with various curricular models such as community-based research, first-year experiences, fieldwork, and capstone courses. For each model, Jacoby describes potential benefits and drawbacks and provides an example. She also offers a section on how service-learning is assessed, and while it touts the truism that we do not grade students based upon performance of service but on the degree to which they demonstrate learning, it also goes on to discuss some strategies to do so and how assessment can be helpful in formative and summative ways, which I found refreshing. In my opinion, assessing the student learning, effort, and community benefit that comes from service-learning is one of if not the most difficult aspect of good service-learning teaching. It can and must be done, but assessment is daunting. I thought the time spent on assessment within this chapter as well as in the subsequent chapter on assessment was a strength of the book. Chapter four concludes with sections on how faculty are motivated and supported; the role of service-learning in review, promotion, and tenure; and how service-learning might lead to departmental engagement. These final sections are absolutely key to curriculum planning, and Jacoby artfully summarizes the issues while helping the reader to see additional resources in the context of her comments. These sections also illustrate how Jacoby is able to
write the book for a host of readers; faculty, engagement center staff, and administrators will find value in these sections.

Chapter five is dedicated to co-curricular service-learning, which Jacoby defines as that which “engages students outside of the formal curriculum that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes” (p. 122, emphasis in the original). I hope readers seeking information about academic service-learning do not skip this chapter. It introduces information about student development, leadership education, and the role of students as initiators or partners. Such discussions are often absent from curricular conversations and planning but are most beneficial.

The assessment chapter, chapter 6, covers quite a bit of ground. It is written to introduce many aims of assessment within service-learning: course-based student learning, programmatic outcomes, level of institutionalization, community perspectives, change within communities, effectiveness of partnerships, quality of teaching, and impact on faculty. Jacoby provides a whirlwind tour of various assessment methods and considerations for selecting the right method(s), but as is the theme of the book, offers additional resources for those readers wanting to learn more. Jacoby ties assessment together with the following chapter on the administration of service-learning by making clear how vital assessment is to gathering data that engenders internal and external support for service-learning.

As my current role within service-learning is as an engagement center director and one who consults from time to time with other campuses, I flew to the chapter on administration of service-learning like a homing pigeon. Chapter 7 is written for those interested in formalizing service-learning within an institution and are at the beginning of doing so. Jacoby’s extensive experience institutionalizing a center and program at the University of Maryland informs the lessons she shares, and the resultant topics are all very important. While on the whole, Service-Learning Essentials weaves together the foundational ideas of service-learning with substantive discussions about its purpose, pitfalls, and complexities, I found myself wanting the same within this chapter. I appreciated the tactic of writing for an audience at the very start of establishing a service-learning program. A baseline of information is absolutely necessary. However, as I have pointed out, we are able to benefit from thirty-plus years of center and program development experience and ought not omit the ways that body of experience can complicate the basic steps of administration. Perhaps this critique comes from my own style of learning: I find it difficult to take someone’s lesson (hard learned through their own experience) and make it authentically my own without knowing the details of their involvement or experiencing it myself. I think sharing stories from administrators who have been through many of the same challenges as Jacoby and who can validate and enrich the lessons she shares would benefit the beginning administrator.

As an illustration, I offer some of the details of Duquesne University’s story of service-learning administration and the ways it complicates a few of the lessons shared within this chapter. Jacoby points out that the existence of a campus service-learning center “indicates that service-learning is more than an abstract concept, that it has legitimacy, and that it is an official and constituent part of the institution” (p. 184). I share this experience. We began the formal service-learning program at Duquesne University in 2005 with the creation of an Office of Service-Learning (OSL). Perusing the lessons Jacoby shares, I think our administrative model would check all of the boxes: the OSL and the service-learning program were well connected to Duquesne’s priorities; built upon the institution’s mission; enjoyed close community relationships; formed and nurtured excellent relationships with faculty, community stakeholders, administrators, students, and local officials; and engaged systematic evaluation of the degree service-learning had been institutionalized and used the data collected to develop and update a strategic plan to guide the OSLs activities. The OSL was located within Academic Affairs, and being a University-wide support office, was closely aligned with our faculty development unit. Over time, the OSLs staff became trusted thought partners to many and garnered respect from a number of the University’s deans. Service-learning was closely aligned with a number of the Dimensions of a Duquesne Education, the document outlining desired student learning across the institution. Duquesne chose to require that all of its undergraduate students take at least one service-learning class prior to graduation and designated classes according to a definition and set of criteria listed in the University core curriculum document. In 2010, it was included as one possible indicator of teaching excellence in the University’s review, promotion, and tenure policies. As a University, we received the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement in 2008 and were reclassified again in 2015. Arguably, we had administrated the development of service-learning very well.

In 2012, we conducted a student learning outcomes assessment across all service-learning classes. We found that our service-learning students made significant academic gains such as engagement with learning and critical thinking. They did not, however,
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demonstrate any appreciable gains (as measured pre- and post-course) in civic development or social responsibility. Shortly thereafter, we welcomed two national engagement experts to campus to do an external review of our Office’s programs. After meeting with stakeholders across the campus and in the community, they found that our Office was highly regarded, but that there was a wide range in service-learning course quality, and that there were disparate levels of departmental buy-in to the requirement. In addition, they found that faculty did not have the resources needed to offset the logistical and pedagogical challenges faced in service-learning, and the OSL lacked the financial resources and staffing necessary to support them at the level they required.

I don’t consider these findings an indication of our administrative failure, but I do think they highlight one possible misconception readers might have about the Administration chapter of Service-Learning Essentials: if you follow the recipe, you should have an outstanding service-learning program. True, some of our service-learning classes are outstanding. Yet some are “community-outreach-light” masquerading as service-learning. And so, by sharing this, I offer the opportunity to see how one institution’s experience with administration adds depth to Jacoby’s suggestions.

Perhaps the most important point within the chapter is the lesson “Go for Quality Over Quantity” (p. 189). It may be common sense that if you have a lean staff and a small budget you might need to restrict the number of classes and faculty you support to a very small number. Yet, this is difficult given the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) message that many service-learning staff receive: Unless you are supporting a large portion of the campus community, or unless you are making this innovative learning experience available to a large swath of the student body, you are not a funding priority or your funding cannot be expected to be expanded. Since funding equals staffing, logistic assistance, and student leadership stipends, it becomes a significantly limiting factor in growing offerings or improving existing classes. Another complicating aspect is that of “requiring” service-learning, a topic Jacoby addresses in the chapter on Complexities. Some see a requirement as guaranteeing that service-learning will be on the radar of faculty, students, and administration alike. This is true, but unless those stakeholders can be fully supported and developed to implement the pedagogy with fidelity, it becomes a double-edged sword. Once the quality of a particular service-learning experience is found wanting, making the decision to de-classify the class or take it off of the books is met with resistance because students “need” the classes to satisfy the requirement. Perhaps some of the dilemmas experienced by Duquesne could have been alleviated with more resources, but this is not true of every concern. One aspect of administration not discussed within the chapter is the need for centers and programs to maintain a steadfast commitment to the civic, public good, or social justice aims of service-learning (depending on the institution’s orientation) and to shape the institution’s notion of service and community engagement to reflect these ends. A center and its staff can help to assure that the definition and characterization of service-learning at their particular institution includes civic, political, or justice-based aims and encourage faculty to include them in the learning outcomes and assessment strategies selected for each service-learning experience. Faculty, departments, and schools are most concerned with disciplinary learning and often with soft-skill development. Having a focus on the civic and political dimensions of service-learning is a necessary part of building the strong foundation Jacoby advocates. Finally, the last complexity I’ll contribute to the chapter on administration is the role of the Center’s staff in helping to evolve and deepen the practice of service-learning by being a thought partner to faculty advisory groups and senior administrators. Jacoby comments briefly on the sort of staffing necessary for centers and the competencies needed among the staff. Thought leadership is vital to advancing the larger institutional commitments to community engagement, and staff are often selected for their experience with and understanding of the pedagogy, but not always for their facility as thought partners with insight to the larger concern of campus-community engagement in which service-learning is situated.

Based upon my experiences at Duquesne University, I think there is merit to introducing less clear-cut considerations of administration than those written for the beginning administrator already included in the chapter. Even after checking the boxes of program administration offered in Service-Learning Essentials, there are other challenges that may rely more on leadership emanating from a center than just good management.

The last two chapters of the book, “Facilitating the Complexities and Dilemmas of Service-Learning” and “Securing the Future of Service-Learning in Higher Education,” are perhaps the most important parts of the book and represent the sort of thought leadership to which I alluded. The two substantive suggestions I make in this review – (a) that service-learning must be one strategy within a larger agenda of public problem solving and community collaboration, and (b) the administrative chapter ought to include stories that link the steps and lessons written for the beginner with experiences of established centers – are in some ways addressed within the final chapters of the book, among an array of other topics. Chapter 8, on complexities and dilemmas, begins by
acknowledging that today’s student body is a more diverse group, who are juggling work and family commitments, than the prototypical white, middle class student for whom much service-learning is designed. It goes on to introduce critical service-learning and the lessons of power, privilege, multiculturalism, and appreciation that can be embedded in student learning. Jacoby then surfaces the relationship between service-learning and politics, spending a fair time discussing the tensions and opportunities that come from associating political engagement with service-learning.

The subject of whether or not to work toward institutionalization is addressed, with Jacoby’s explicit support for the former. The chapter is rounded out with two additional dilemmas: how reciprocity can be found within community-campus partnerships and whether service-learning should be centered on local or global engagement. Chapter 9, on securing the future of service-learning, asks the reader to consider how we might leverage particular pursuits to evolve and sustain service-learning in higher education, such as strengthening the evidence base, fostering a research agenda, institutionalizing, recognizing service-learning within the faculty workload, and associating partnerships with broader community-campus engagement and economic development.

For these chapters to be placed at the conclusion of the book makes sense in one way: they leave the reader considering the heavy and necessary issues that speak to the future of service-learning and its quality. In another way, however, it isolates these conversations into a subsection that the reader may well forego. Given that Service-Learning Essentials is a handbook of sorts, readers will undoubtedly be attracted to the brevity of the catalog of topics. Its format will allow for dip-in reading. But I wonder if the critical conversations in the final two chapters are not made a part of the other areas of the book that the import of their message will be lost. As I said earlier in this review, we do not have a wealth of guides that include basic building blocks and critical conversations about the greater purposes of service-learning. Service-learning Essentials provides this marriage, but only if the reader attends to the last few sections. This is why I made the interjections within the discussion of the partnerships and administration chapters. Although both views are touched upon in the final chapters of the book, not having them included in the earlier chapters disconnects the insights from the review of practice.

What I most appreciated about the ways these important issues were discussed in chapters 8 and 9 is that Jacoby leaves the final say open, helping the reader to know that these are not matters that are settled or definitive. There is often discomfort with unresolved insights, and I am glad that Jacoby allows the reader to be in the conversation with her by pulling together various perspectives on each issue. I could easily see using sections of these chapters as conversation starters within faculty coffee groups or as framing for writing retreats. Certainly, as I mentor new faculty and staff I will point them to the subjects of the last two chapters as they read the earlier sections of the book.

In total, Service-Learning Essentials: Questions, Answers, and Lessons Learned is a strong contribution to the small set of manuals and guides we have for service-learning. Jacoby’s approach blends basic information with substantive discussions of the purposes and dilemmas of service-learning. She helps the reader to learn about scholarship that can further inform the reader on the topics. My advice to the reader or to those referring this book to others is to draw the conversations in the last two chapters into the previous seven. The last few chapters serve to convene the most critical issues facing the field of service-learning, and will help its field-builders find synergies among the issues as they work to evolve and sustain the practice of service-learning.

Notes

1 Some of what I recount here is described in much greater detail in a forthcoming chapter titled, “Service-learning as Catalyst for Integrating Community Engagement Across Core Academic Functions” (in Jacob, Sutin, Weideman, & Yeager, forthcoming).

2 In response to the evaluations and findings shared here, Duquesne University’s central administration placed a moratorium on the service-learning requirement, redeveloped the Office of Service-Learning as the Center for Community-Engaged Teaching and Research, made additional resources available to its work, and charged its staff and advisory committee to develop a conception of community-engaged learning that more strongly represents the civic and social justice aspects of public problem solving across the disciplines. We’ve moved squarely into a second-stage of administration that we feel others can learn from even when just beginning a service-learning center.

References


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