

Economic Instruction

In this section, the *Journal of Economic Education* publishes articles, notes, and communications describing innovations in pedagogy, hardware, materials, and methods for treating traditional subject matter. Issues involving the way economics is taught are emphasized.

MICHAEL WATTS, Section Editor

Integrating Economics Research, Education, and Service

Nancy Brooks and Richard Schramm

Abstract: Since January 2000, the authors have experimented with an integrated community-based research-education-service model that combined (1) funded research into the local economic effects of the University of Vermont; (2) a sequence of four semester-long courses to conduct the research and to implement and evaluate key findings; and (3) a university-community partnership that defined and guided the research and helped identify and implement actions that grew out of the research. The authors found that combining all three goals—research, education, and service—into a set of integrated activities can offer substantial benefits to faculty, students, and community groups. In particular, these innovative experiential courses can improve the quality of learning and serve as a capstone course for an undergraduate economics major.

Key words: economic development, impact analysis, service learning
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College and university mission statements generally include research, educational, and service goals, with these goals mirrored in promotion and tenure guidelines, although the importance placed on each area varies across institutions. In their academic work related to these goals, university faculty may keep the three activities separate—faculty have research, classes, and professional and community service activities—or combine them on a pair-wise basis.

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Combining all three goals—research, education, and service—into a set of integrated activities offers additional benefits to faculty, students, and community groups. This combination, research-service-learning (RSL), is a subset of problem-based service learning (PBSL) (Gordon 1999), in which the community-provided problem as the focus of service-learning activities offers clear opportunities for academic research and education.

There are advantages in combining research, education, and service. The researcher gains student research assistance, access to community data, and possibly financial support. These have to be weighed against any loss of autonomy in the conduct of research and costs involved in establishing and operating within such a partnership. The student benefits from opportunities to conduct independent or team research and to learn more about the real world through interaction with individuals and organizations in the public, nonprofit, or private sectors. John Dewey (1938) believed that successful learning could not be separated from relevant actions.¹ Students learn to use core concepts in economics as part of their community research. Hansen, Salemi, and Siegfried (2002) pointed out that learning economic literacy requires that students “use it or lose it.” The opportunity to learn research methods, economic theory, and the realities and context of their application needs to be balanced against other course goals, student interests, and time. Finally, the community partner often gains information, research findings, technical assistance, and financial support, all of which may be forthcoming from a partnership of this nature. However, the partner must weigh this against a loss of some control over the nature and goal of service and the costs involved in making such partnerships work.²

Between 2000 and 2003, we experimented with a set of academic activities that combined research, service, and education. These activities included research on the local economic effects of the University of Vermont’s expenditures, working with community partners to increase the net positive benefits of local employment and purchasing expenditures, and a four-semester service-learning course sequence to enhance student learning. In this article we report on the application of this model and the research, teaching, and service results, and provide a set of conclusions and recommendations about applying this approach more widely.

APPLICATION: BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK

Success in integrating research, education, and service into an interrelated set of activities requires that a set of essential elements be in place. First, there needs to be a structure that serves to identify and mediate the interests of faculty, students, and community in the design and implementation of an RSL course. This requires some form of formal or informal university-community partnership that can ensure that the research, educational, and service goals of the activities are all satisfied. Second, the nature of the research, type of students, and needs of the community partner(s) must fit well. The research question that is addressed must be of direct interest to the community partner, appropriately challenging to the students, and adequately generalizable to meet faculty interests in scholarship.

Finally, the educational component of this triad needs to incorporate the basic elements of problem-based service-learning courses (Gordon 1999), with some extensions to support more explicitly the academic research elements of this approach.

Our experiment incorporated all of these essential elements. It combined funded research on the local economic effects of the University of Vermont (UVM), a sequence of four semester-long service-learning courses to assist in this research and resulting outreach activities, and a clearly defined university-community partnership that supported and oversaw these research and educational activities.

The experiment was supported by the University of Vermont/Burlington Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC), 1 of over 100 such centers initiated over the last eight years by grants from the Office of University Partnerships, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).³ The University of Vermont/Burlington COPC began in fall 1999. Its Economic Impacts Project, implemented through the four courses, examined how the university's \$300 million annual budget affects the local county, city of Burlington, and its lower income neighborhoods. The Impacts Project looks in detail at employment (over 2,000 nonfaculty employees), purchasing expenditures, and the policies and practices of UVM that shape these expenditures. The Partnership is interested in ways to direct these impacts to strengthen the local economy and benefit lower income neighborhoods while meeting university goals.⁴ The fundamental economic problem we addressed in our impact analysis was how to modify university policies and practices to increase overall community well-being. Students found that many potential policy changes were not feasible because the benefits were external from the university's perspective, but the costs were internal.

The activities of the Impacts Project are overseen by a 14-person advisory committee that includes members from UVM, local and state government, and local workforce and business development nonprofit organizations. The role of the advisory committee is to help set the research agenda, help develop and implement recommendations, and serve as resource people to the field research courses.

The research and teaching agenda encompasses general and specific concerns of the faculty involved in the project. Their general interest is to understand the role of major public and private institutions in the local economy and the use and limitations of strategies such as import substitution by such institutions to foster local economic development. More specifically, the research agenda includes the documentation and analysis of UVM employment and purchasing expenditures by level, type, and location of impact and the development, analysis, implementation, and evaluation of UVM-community actions that meet the Project community goals.⁵ The research includes study of the tradeoffs involved in potential changes in UVM policies and practices regarding purchasing (e.g., a targeted buy Vermont policy) and employment (e.g., a UVM living-wage policy). The goal of the teaching agenda was, in short, the creation of an experiential version of an applied senior seminar on urban economic issues taught by focusing on the role of a large institution in local economic growth and development.

APPLICATION: THE RESEARCH-SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE

The vehicle for this experiment in integrating research, education, and service has been a course called UVM and the local economy. This course was offered four times over a three-year period (spring 2000 through fall 2002), with each course building on the work of the previous one.

Students were predominately seniors with some first-year graduate students from UVM's community development and applied economics (CDAE) master's program.⁶ The seniors had to have a minimum grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 to take the course because the task force nature of the course requires a lot of student responsibility. These high-quality upper-level students entered the course with considerable skills and background. This course was presented to them as a capstone—an opportunity to build on their skills and knowledge base and to learn how economic concepts are applied to consider real-world situations. Our goal for graduating majors was to develop their economic skills, including their ability to analyze economic information, to apply economic reasoning to address an economic problem, and to synthesize and integrate information and reasoning into a coherent whole. The intent of the courses was for students to work with faculty and the Project advisory committee to conduct research, to write reports, to report their findings; to develop and to carry out policy recommendations; and to learn relevant economic theory, methods, and interpersonal skills in the process.

The courses have been similar in structure and in learning goals but have differed in their emphasis on research, outreach, and evaluation activities. The research produced during the first two courses served primarily to document the current effects of the university's employment and purchasing practices on the local economy and to develop specific policy recommendations to increase the positive economic effects of the university in the community. The outreach activities of the third course focused on implementing the policy recommendations developed in the previous courses. The fourth course focused on evaluating and institutionalizing the policy changes. Even though each course consisted of an entirely new group of students, they were required to build on the efforts and findings of the students from the earlier courses.

The courses have included the following activities:

- Working with the advisory committee and with more specific groups of university-city-community members involved in employment and purchasing activities.
- Reviewing core economic concepts and further developing the economic ideas employed in local economic development through reading, lectures, and class discussion in the context of the project.⁷
- Identifying and learning needed research skills (interviewing, surveying, impact analysis), personal and interpersonal skills (independent study, working in teams), learning skills (reflecting on experiences through writing), and data analysis (working with, for example, county business patterns, census, and Regional Input-Output Multiplier data).

- Gathering information, analyzing and organizing information, developing findings and recommendations, writing reports, and presenting findings and recommendations to faculty and university and community partners.

RESULTS

Research

The student reports yielded considerable information and findings about university employment and purchasing policies and practices, their impacts, and how to change the magnitude and pattern of expenditure effects to benefit the university and the community.⁸ The research also contributed to an understanding of the role and local effects of large institutions and the viability and effectiveness of a variety of institution-based policies to promote local economic development.

Service and Outreach

Students were able to implement a substantial number of policy and procedural changes at the university that will significantly benefit the community. These included a UVM placement and mentoring program for local residents with barriers to employment, changes in the university's purchasing Web site to indicate vendors that were locally owned, and development of a brochure distributed to local vendors about how to do business with UVM. Students learned that policy changes like these that address information failures could be win-win solutions for both the community and the university. For example, in their survey work, students found that many local residents believed that UVM only hired professors. Students helped UVM develop a relationship with the state's Department of Employment and Training to inform unemployed residents about the rich variety of job opportunities at UVM.

Education

Student self-evaluations of their learning indicated strong motivation from the course experience, significant learning of people and process skills, information-gathering and analysis skills, and writing and presentation skills. Students found that elements from both macro and microeconomic theory guided how they thought about and conducted their work. Course evaluations provided important additional information about how to structure and implement research-based service learning courses of this nature. Some students said that they initially felt uncomfortable in this type of course because they wanted to "learn from the experts" in a more traditional format where the professor surveys the field for them. Students felt empowered when they realized they could identify what they needed to learn.

Students consistently reported that they were highly motivated because the course was applied and hands on, the problems being addressed were real, and the work they were doing was important and valued (especially by the advisory

committee). They were motivated by their role in the research design and the implementation of their recommendations. Finally, they were engaged by a feeling that this course was helping them progress into the real world, doing the kind of work expected of them after leaving college, and gaining the skills and, in some cases, the contacts needed for that transition.

Students reported that they had gained important people and process skills. They learned about working in teams, working with faculty, and working with an advisory committee. They came to understand how to work with people dealing with organizational politics and the importance of cost-benefit analysis to think about tradeoffs. They learned the personal skills needed to conduct interviews and work with a wide variety of people to collect information (local residents, university officials, university employees in low-skilled jobs, local business and non-profit organization directors). And they learned from their reflective writing.

Students said that they had learned considerable skills in gathering and analyzing data. The course offered them an opportunity to apply appropriate theoretical models to ground their empirical findings. For example, several students reported the opportunity to apply skills (e.g., statistical methods, multiplier analysis) and theory (e.g., how to design incentive-based policy solutions to externalities and imperfect information market failures) learned in earlier courses and to understand more fully these methods and ideas as a result of their use in real rather than contrived situations.

Students learned how to build on and integrate their work with the work of others. Not only did students need to collaborate as part of their own task force, they also needed to build on the work of students from previous courses. No student took more than one of the four courses in the sequence yet the courses built on each other with little time for repetition.

Finally, students reported learning skills of organizing information, preparing reports, and making presentations from the course experience. This included learning how important these stages of a task force's activities are and how much time and effort such activities take. They also indicated satisfaction with the final report that bore their names and that it would be listed on their resumes. Students found that the writing they did in this class was challenging but rewarding because it was geared to a broader audience than the one for which they normally wrote.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our experience using a service-learning class to carry out the research, outreach, and evaluation elements of a university-community partnership project was very positive. All parties—faculty, students, and community partners—reported benefits from the three-year effort. Students, in particular, found the learning experience unique and valuable, providing considerable support for the idea of linking their education to both community service and faculty research.

Key to the success of this effort was the university-community partnership that provided the structure for identifying research and outreach needs, setting priorities, and mediating conflicts among participants. Although students and classes may turn over quickly, research and community service often require a longer

horizon. Partnerships like those developed in COPCs lend themselves to this longer term perspective.

Sequencing service-learning classes around a common topic, so that each builds on the previous class or classes, provides opportunities for students to begin their work each new semester on a stronger foundation and to dig deeper into the service-learning content over the semester. Changing the emphasis each semester, for example from research to outreach to evaluation, also opens up the possibility of the same student taking the class for several semesters, each time working on a different phase of the study. Because we offered the class as a capstone course, no student took the class for more than one semester. Opening the class up to juniors, for example, would allow some students to take the class for more than one semester.

NOTES

1. Recent scholarship that articulates this teaching philosophy includes Hansen, Salemi, and Siegfried (2002) and Becker and Watts (1998). The need to connect economic concepts to the real world is another prominent theme in the current pedagogical literature (Case 2002; Becker and Watts 1998). The use of real-world case studies and examples reflects this priority.
2. The costs and benefits of university-community partnerships are discussed in Nye and Schramm (1999) and Nyden, Figert, Shibley, and Burrows (1997).
3. The purpose of the COPC program is to help develop or strengthen effective, lasting university and community partnerships designed to address critical community issues. (COPC Web site: oup.org). HUD funding, with university and community cost sharing, supports a set of projects that are carried out through different university-community partnerships. Projects are also intended to provide partners with the experience and increased capacity needed to support continuing partnership work on these and other issues.
4. Our focus was on identifying and increasing positive marginal effects as opposed to attempting to measure total effects. This makes impact projects of this sort useful for universities and cities of any size. It may be difficult to measure the total impacts of a small college on a large metropolitan region but easier to formulate policies to alter the marginal impacts of that college on the region.
5. In addition to employment and purchasing, there are many other ways a university affects the local economy. Technology transfer and student spending are examples. We chose to focus on employment and purchasing to keep the project more tractable.
6. The seniors were majors in economics or community development and applied economics.
7. Core concepts reviewed in our course included such basics as opportunity costs, multiplier effects, utility maximization, and market and government failure. In addition, students learned and used more advanced theory on topics such as models of local economic growth, the nature and sources of urban agglomeration economies, and labor market imperfections. Students in our course covered and applied many of the theoretical topics and readings that would have been presented in a traditional urban economics course using a text such as O'Sullivan (2000). Our course syllabi included chapters from O'Sullivan and prominent articles such as Glaeser, Kallal, Scheinkman, and Shleifer (1992) and Persky, Ranney, and Wiewel (1993).
8. The student reports that document their research findings, recommendations, and outreach activities are available on the Web at www.uvm.edu/~copc.

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**James S. Denton Appointed as
Executive Director of Heldref Publications**

James S. Denton was appointed executive director and chief operating officer of Heldref Publications in late September 2006. At the time of his appointment, Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, president of the Helen Dwight Reid Educational Foundation, said, “We are delighted and fortunate to have Mr. Denton join our team, and we are anxious to make use of his well-documented vision, leadership, and management expertise to help take the organization to new heights.”

Denton previously served as executive director of Freedom House, where he restored fiscal solvency to the organization, dramatically increasing its budget and leading a massive expansion of its international programs and publishing operations. Subsequently, Denton worked as a communications consultant with clients including public broadcasting, several heads of government, and various cultural organizations and think tanks. He has written, edited, and published major works on human rights, democratic development, and terrorism.

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