

Chancellor's Chair for Teaching Excellence

Evaluating Foundations for Service-Learning

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Brock University's first-year *Foundations in Service Learning* course (now *Foundations for Community Engagement*), launched in September 2010, is pedagogically and institutionally path-breaking in many ways, including its emphasis on experiential learning in community settings, attention to critical reflection on ideas about service and community, and openness to all students in the university. In its pilot phase, the new course requires systematic evaluation in order to identify its successful elements and embellish them, as well as to analyze and rectify failings so that the course becomes more effective, practically and pedagogically, in each successive year. The new course presents an occasion for institutional learning, modeling the development of other such courses, and contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning. The pilot offers an opportunity to examine the educational value of high-impact practices for first-year students, generally, and of service learning courses more specifically. Because of the originality and complexity of the course, four strands of evaluation research need to be conducted:

1. Critical contextual analysis

Initiatives in service-learning at Brock University, while innovative, are connected to wider movements and changes in post-secondary education in Canada. Evaluating the new course requires reviewing its inception and the philosophies that inform its objectives. Examining the new course in a sociological perspective provides insight into the particular shape it has taken and situates Brock's initiatives in relation to the literature on service-learning in Canada.

2. Documentation and evaluation of the course design and implementation

A course portfolio is a public document that demonstrates the scholarship of teaching through its organization around key areas of investigation. A course portfolio is a vehicle for evaluating the course design, delivery, content and outcomes of the pilot course. In particular, the course portfolio will present reflections on (1) the challenge of defining service-learning, and (2) the question of how to create coherence between the taught curriculum and the out-of-classroom elements of the course.

3. Qualitative assessment of students' learning outcomes

Qualitative analysis of students' written reflective assignments (blogs and e-portfolios) allows for comparison of the formal learning objectives of the course with what students themselves say they have learned. Students will give consent for their coursework to be studied for this purpose and confidentiality will be maintained.

4. Quantitative analysis of the impact of the course on student engagement

Research shows that participation in service-learning is a predictor of heightened community participation and student engagement more generally. An end of year survey, which is closely modeled on other surveys of student engagement, will help to indicate the degree to which this course fosters student engagement and in what forms.