Portrait of a Work-Study Program Assessment

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Institutions of higher education invest time and money directing co-curricular programs that allow students to formally engage in the local community. Community-service learning is one type of program recently dubbed “high impact” (Kuh, 2008). However, it is not enough to simply refer to a program as “high impact”, it is essential to demonstrate actual impact on student learning. The current report provides a portrait of one community service-learning program’s assessment of student learning.

The Federal Work Study (FWS) program is administered by the university financial aid office in collaboration with student employment and the Office of Community Service Learning. The FWS program employs students within local non-profit agencies. Not only are the FWS student employees paid for their work, but it is expected that FWS student employees gain knowledge, skills and abilities from the experience. Therefore, student learning outcomes were developed, in order to assess the impact on student learning associated with the FWS program. A measure to assess learning, the December-May 360 Student/Site Supervisor Evaluation (DM-360), was also developed. The DM-360 is comprised of parallel surveys for purposes of both student and employer evaluation of learning. A portrait of the steps in creation of the FWS assessment plan follows: 1) defining learning associated with FWS, 2) developing adequate measurement, and 3) thinking about ways in which the results can be used for improvement.

Defining Student Learning Outcomes

Ideally, student learning outcomes describe what the students who participated in the program should think, know or demonstrate (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004). In addition, student learning outcomes must be measurable – not necessarily tallied or quantified – but practitioners must be able to identify or observe that learning has occurred. Adequate student
learning outcomes do not describe what is done to a student (e.g., the qualities of the program itself), but rather what the student will know or do as a result of their participation in FWS. Student learning outcomes for the FWS program were written with each of these characteristics in mind.

Specifically, the outcomes were developed over the course of two years. The outcomes identified the first year specified that as a result of their FWS experience, students would 1) demonstrate increased communication skills in the workplace (oral, written and electronic), and 2) apply critical-thinking skills in the workplace. The rationale for these objectives was based upon the notion that institutions of higher education are called upon to promote students’ skills beyond the discipline—for example, communication and reasoning skills (AAC&U, 2014; Hart Research Associates, 2013). The second year, the critical-thinking objective was modified to define critical-thinking in the workplace as ethical reasoning. Specifically, the revised objective stated that students would apply ethical-reasoning skills in the workplace. Ethical Reasoning was defined according to a framework that was developed at the institution in which the current study was conducted. Specifically, the theory posits that ethical reasoning can be viewed from at least eight different perspectives: Fairness, Outcomes, Rights, Character, Liberty, Authority Empathy, and Responsibilities (Institution website blinded for review, nd). Once student learning outcomes were identified, the next logical step was to develop adequate measurement of the outcomes.

Developing Adequate Measurement

When conducting assessment, it is easy to become myopic within the cycle of assessment and neglect sharp focus on student learning. The ideal measure is carefully aligned with programming and will offer results that can lead to program improvement. For example, there are numerous items on the DM-360 specifically mapped to the first FWS objective,
communication skills in the workplace. Students respond to items, such as “I share my perspective with others” and “I consider myself to be an active listener”. Ethical reasoning questions are scenario-based items; students select the response that best represents the form of ethical reasoning identified within the prompt (e.g., “Which of the following options best represents the ethical reasoning perspective of outcomes?”). Both students and employers respond to parallel items written to assess students’ communication. Students responded to the item “At my FWS site, silencing my phone is important;” whereas, employers were asked whether students actually did silence their phone at work.

In addition to students’ employment at their FWS site, they attend three educational reflection sessions each semester. The educational reflection sessions focus on work competencies related to the FWS experience. The reflection sessions also provided an opportunity to collect qualitative data on students’ perceptions of student learning associated with their FWS experience. Moreover, in addition to what students gain from their FWS experience, the focus groups provided an opportunity to obtain specific information on learning that was not occurring. In sum, engaging in a thoughtful and intentional approach to developing adequate measures that map directly to program activities can result in useful information for program improvement.

**Using Results for Improvement**

Students \(N=32\) year one completed the DM-360 in December (D) and May (M) and attended the three educational reflections per semester. Change from pre-to-post was negligible. However, this provided an opportunity to identify areas for growth. For example, if all of our results had pointed to significant pre-to-post change, we could showcase our findings, but would be left guessing about areas in which we would benefit from change. Areas where significant
differences between student competencies and supervisor expectations were evident were also flagged for intervention. For example, students’ view of texting at work versus supervisor’s view of students’ texting at work provided an area for intervention through educational reflection. Subsequent post-intervention assessment will offer insights into whether or not we were successful.

Developing an intentional approach for assessing Federal Work Study is an iterative process. Clear focus, commitment and professional expertise are essential for achieving a successful program measurement goal. Consequently, by defining learning associated with FWS, developing adequate measurement, and using results for improvement, the FWS assessment goals are both practical and attainable.

References


Institution (nd). The Eight Key Questions (8KQ). http://www.xxx.edu/mc/8-key-questions.shtml