

Service learning as a tool for Capacity Development in Rural Nova Scotia  
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### **Introduction**

In many parts of Canada and the world, a substantial disparity exists in economic and social development between urban and rural communities. Although there is considerable variation, most small communities beyond commuting distance from a large urban centre are struggling with developing a new social and economic identity beyond the resource-based economy. Brain drain is the term applied to the loss of skilled labor to greener pastures (Mahroum, 2000). As skilled people leave, so do community leaders, the tax base, jobs, and the infrastructure that sustains a community (Fellegi, 1996).

Rural revitalization efforts are often thwarted by the fact that service and infrastructure policy is developed without local input. Macro-level decisions are often made in isolation of each other and without examining their cumulative effects on rural communities. At the level of the community, the determinants that affect people's health and the health of their community are intertwined. At the level of provincial and federal governments, these determinants are streamlined into separate sectors. There are few concrete mechanisms whereby residents of rural communities can provide input into the development of policies that directly affect their sustainability. When these opportunities are provided, rural communities often do not have the capacity to use evidence (e.g., research that clarifies issues and that predicts the potential impact of decisions on rural development) to support their position.

Post-secondary educators must be concerned with the development of capacity within individuals (students) and organizations (the institution) to contribute to increasing the community capacity necessary to address the many and complex problems that society faces. Canada is in the midst of a resurgence of interest in education as a vehicle for developing engaged citizens. In the post-secondary sector, in addition to Canadian institutions explicitly referring to educating citizens in their mission statements and/or stated learning objectives, there is a growing interest and commitment to developing research agendas and both co-curricular programs and academic courses that have objectives related to developing and sustaining civic commitment. The creation of the Community University Research Alliance program and the newly established Canadian Association for Community Service-Learning are but two demonstrations of the burgeoning interest in providing and supporting meaningful opportunities for campuses to develop policies and practices which encourage an actively engaged civic commitment in their students, staff, faculty and alumni.

To counter the depletion of human resources required to sustain rural communities a major research project was undertaken by a partnership between Dalhousie University's Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre and the Nova Scotia Coastal Communities Network. The purpose of this study was to explore the effect of student engagement in service learning to increase the capacity of rural organizations to influence and to develop policy that contributes to the health and sustainability of rural communities.

## Literature Review

Civic commitment has become a set of skills, knowledge, values and motivations that many need to systematically, and consciously learn in order that this fundamental cornerstone of a democratic and just society not be lost to us. (Colby, et al. 2003)

There is a renewed interest in educating university students for civic commitment. There are multiple definitions and a variety of ways of understanding civic commitment and/or citizenship, most in agreement to some extent that these concepts concern the fundamental ways in which citizens are actively involved in the democratic functioning of their communities.

This is not altogether a new concept in North America. Universities have traditionally been involved to some extent in their communities with one of the main traditional outcomes of post-secondary education being the positive contribution it makes to building human capital in community populations. (Bringle, Games, Malloy. 1999)

Developing the capacity of Canadian university students and post-secondary institutions to contribute positively to serious challenges that pervade the communities within which they exist could be an excellent method of community improvement. The community building framework developed by Robert Chaskin (2001) proposes four major strategies for building community capacity, leadership development, organisational development, community organizing, and collaborative relations among organisations. The framework recognizes that contextual circumstances that may help or hinder community capacity and efforts to build it. Specific goals that have a direct impact at the community level are a significant component of capacity building.

Development of leadership skills and attitudes can contribute to positive change in communities needs. The term 'civic leadership' has been used to describe going, "beyond the skills of one person to functions that people, families, communities, and even nations can exhibit. Civic leadership is about collective action, public will, and community" (Morse, 1989, p.47) Further to this, "young potential leaders must be able to see how whole systems function and how interaction with neighboring systems may be constructively managed." (Gardner, 1990, p. 159).

Community service-learning (CSL) has been identified as one strategy with real potential for encouraging civic leadership development through involvement in intentionally designed service experiences where powerful learning occurs, benefiting both students and community partners. (Eyler and Giles, 1999) It has also demonstrated positive outcomes in terms of increased sense of purpose and relevance for involved faculty and for post-secondary institutions that support these initiatives. (Jacoby, 1996) Known by a variety of terms (community service-learning, service learning, community-based education), this learning strategy has generally agreed upon key concepts that are highlighted in this definition provided by authors Eyler and Giles (1999):

"Service-learning is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves. " (p.3)

This study explores the contribution of student interns as participants in projects designed to impact policy to benefit rural communities in Nova Scotia of student interns

## **Methods**

The Nova Scotia Coastal Communities Network is a non-profit, province-wide organization comprising 220 rural community organizations. It was established in 1992 with a mandate to encourage dialogue, share information, and develop strategies and action plans to promote the survival and development of rural communities. The Coastal Communities Network works with community organizations and university partners to develop and implement strategies for communities to develop and influence policy. The Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre is a collaborative effort of the three health sciences faculties at Dalhousie University (Medicine, Health Professions and Dentistry) and the Provincial Departments of Health in the Atlantic region. The Centre has a strong focus on moving research to action in Atlantic Canada. The Centre has provided leadership on the organization, analysis, and synthesis of collections of research studies for policy and practice (e.g., *Research to Action: Working Together for the Integration of Canadians with Disabilities Forum*, May 1999). The Centre involves students from health and social sciences disciplines as interns and research assistants, in postdoctoral training, in independent studies and thesis work.

### **Intern training:**

The student interns were involved in a 16 week internship program in rural policy and other development issues developed for undergraduate and graduate students, involving university faculty and community organizations. Students then put knowledge into practice, used research for problem-solving, communicated results in understandable and practical ways, and gained greater understanding of community development processes. They were involved in research synthesis, research projects, rural community diagnostics, and the development of strategies to influence policy. The program for the student internships evolved over four years with improvements being made based on annual evaluations. The components of the final program that evolved consisted of meeting with community partners, student training, a mid point assessment, data analysis and write up and a wrap up meeting with interns partners and staff.

The desired outcomes were ambitious and were designed to lead to better understanding about issues affecting life in rural communities; improved research skills in qualitative and quantitative methods, including collecting, analyzing and reporting; knowledge about conducting ethical research; knowledge about secondary data sources; understanding the impact of public policies on rural communities; developing policy change strategies; using social science research to influence and develop policy; developing a work plan; finding and using community resources; communications skills, i.e. interviewing, facilitation, focus groups; making public presentations; and working with community groups.

## **Projects**

Interns were paired with a community-based sponsor who provided guidance and support through the internship. The research work the interns were carrying out was intended to be relevant to the work of the sponsoring organization. Projects included:

- Woods Harbour Women's Resource Center - Barriers to Coastal Women Attaining Economic Self-Sufficiency
- Coastal Communities Network - Policy Issues Pertaining to Nova Scotia's Rural Black Community
- Stan Rogers Folk Festival - Social, Cultural, and Economic Effects of a Local Cultural Festival
- Mabou and District Development Association - Impact of Rural School Closures
- *Coastal Area Management*, of interest to communities and municipal governments as a way of sharing experiences and best practices in coastal area management.
- *Healthy and Sustainable Community Development*, -developing a comprehensive understanding of and an integrated approach for community groups involved in social, economic, environmental and cultural development across the province.
- *Retention of Health Professionals in Rural Communities* involved community profiling and asset mapping based on typical community indicators, such as income and population, and indicators of health disparity to identify ways that communities can make themselves more welcoming places for health professionals and others. Outcomes of the research include a "menu" of 'community environment' retention options for the particular region.

## **Methods**

At the conclusion of each internship, questionnaires were administered to examine the impact the research program had on the participating students. The questions asked were:

### **Working in Rural communities**

Were you able to get to know the communities in which you were working?

Did you work on non RCIP related activities in the community?

What motivated you to carry out your work during the internship?

What frustrated you as you carried out your work?

Did you feel like you were working alone or as part of a team?

### **From Theory to practice:**

Were you able to apply some of what you learned in your university program during the course of the internship?

What would be the three most important topics you would include if you were to design a course for research interns working in rural communities?

Do you feel your work is credible or valuable? Why or why not?

Did you feel a sense of personal ownership for the work you did?

What were the 2 best things about the internship?

If you could change two things about the internship what would they be?

During the last year of the program Community Partners were asked to comment on the impact of the students interns on their communities

## **Findings**

Typical intern responses to the questions posed are as follows

### **Working in Rural communities**

#### **Were you able to get to know the communities in which you were working?**

*“Yes, I felt that I thoroughly got to know the small community that I lived in as well as the surrounding ones. They were all very welcoming.”*

*“I knew the community initially, but I got to know it from a much different perspective”*

*“I knew it pretty well before, but it gave me the opportunity to talk to people and our other nonprofit organizations.”*

*“Yes. Several individuals provided support throughout the summer. I felt invited into many communities because of the work I was doing”.*

#### **Did you work on non RCIP related activities in the community?**

*“Yes, I did. I felt it was very positive in giving me a greater appreciation for everything the center was contributing to the community.”*

*“Yes, it was positive. Became familiar with other projects. Participated in community activities. Became quite familiar with policy around the fishery.”*

*“Very positive experience. I attended meetings in other areas of NB that involved rural health. All were extremely positive.”*

#### **What motivated you to carry out your work during the internship?**

*“Knowing that I was possibly going to make a positive impact on the community and add to the community’s ability to be proactive in their goals.”*

*“I was motivated by my community sponsor, who tried to keep me on my toes. They expected me to be organized an up-to-date.”*

*“Loyalty to association. They'll like social activism. Wanted to help community. I knew that my work was valued and useful.”*

*“This is a thesis topic for me and I had a lot of work completed in this topic during my courses. The topic is near and dear to me. I also enjoy knowing that the research will be used.”*

*“The passion and dedication of the community members, and the overall importance of the goals of the project.”*

*“The people in the communities that I met. I really wanted still want to produce something to help them. They work so hard I would do anything to make their jobs easier.”*

*“I was motivated by the enthusiasm of my project partners. I was also motivated by the hard work of the project participants. They gave their time to meet with me so I felt responsible for completing the work I started.”*

#### **What frustrated you as you carried out your work?**

*“I was frustrated about to the ethics proposal. My community sponsor was growing impatient as well.”*

“Ethics submission and the delay it cost.”

“The politics behind our organization.”

“The lack of the community partner that was committed to the project. The lack of the people to help me with simple things like booking venues such and food. The inability to get partners at meetings. The lack of communication on all fronts between partners, academic staff, and even people that wanted to join the project.”

“There were some individuals who referred to me as a CFA (come from a way) and treated me with a degree of hostility. This was isolated. Frustration also resulted from focus groups. A lot of effort went into inviting people who often never came out to the meetings.”

**Did you feel like you were working alone or as part of a team?**

“I worked alone, which I like, but I had a chance to meet and exchange with my community partner on a regular basis.”

“I felt as part of a team. The work was done alone, but I had support if I needed it.”

“The project team had a lot to do with having another project team member in the office - to bounce ideas off of regularly.”

**Were you able to apply some of what you learned in your university program during the course of the internship?**

“Yes, biology and the Law and Politics course I took came in very handy when understanding the issues.

“Certainly, I applied my research skills as well as my writing skills.”

“A lot. It was important to me to implement some of the things I learned during the training session.”

“Yes, especially report writing, ethics and creating survey tool.”

“Yes. My coursework in policy research methods, and the health care system and population health. It was a great use of my courses, and I learned new things that will benefit me in further courses.”

**What would be the three most important topics you would include if you were to design a course for research interns working in rural communities?**

“Ethics! Communication in Communities.”

“Ethical conduct in any interviews and writing. Comparing and conducting data. Data analysis and report writing.”

“Ethics. Data analysis, report writing, and how to conduct focus groups and interviews.”

“Getting involved with our community and working with your community. Keep the interests of the community upfront.”

“Understanding the volunteer community. Qualitative research is the best method. Understanding the audience of rural research findings.”

“Conducting active research - what it is/why it's important. Working in communities - what language to use. It's hard to lose the academic speaking/writing style. Using qualitative information: how to work with qualitative data, how to collect, synthesize etc.”

**Do you feel your work is credible or valuable? Why or why not?**

“Yes, I feel as if I was working towards a real goal. It will be valuable for the community because it will add credibility to what the fishermen have been saying so that the fishermen will have the support of the community as well.”

“Yes, my work will hopefully let policy makers know the trends happening in rural communities.”

“I feel that way and I hope that this is realistic, because I don't want to see this work being useless. I think it is credible, because I documented case studies, which are based on "real-life" experiences of nonprofits.”

“Yes. I know that the recommendations, I make will be taken seriously. The women that I interviewed were very interested. Feedback from the association has been all positive.”

“I do feel it was valuable, especially since other CHBs and people in the districts are very interested in pushing this further.”

“Yes, because the topic is of great interest and a demand for rural communities.”

“Yes. It involved a great deal of work. It feels more values and credible knowing the community partners plan on using the out come of this research to advance some of their own policy initiatives.”

### **Did you feel a sense of personal ownership for the work you did?**

“I feel a great sense of personal ownership. I know, I spent more than 35 hours a week on this project and I did it because I want to see it succeed.”

### **What were the 2 best things about the internship?**

“Meeting new people; learning about policy to a greater extent that I ever imagined; getting valuable experience in an area I would lit to further myself in.”

“Learning more about research. Meeting new people. The chance to examine policies.”

“The learning and skills development. The people, AHPRC, RCIP, other interns.”

“The contacts I made during the course of the internship. The support and training by RCIP.”

“I think of the internship is giving back to the community, and that is by far the most important thing. I think it is also teaching the academics of the future value of this research. That alone I change the system to make it more valuable in the future for the academic world.”

“Working in the community. Undertaking a qualitative centered research project.”

### **If you could change two things about the internship what would they be?**

Being able to interview more people and get more participation. “

“I would have an earlier ethics approval. To have more time to conduct interviews and focus groups. “

To prepare the ethics proposal during the training week.

The ethics submission.

Meetings (updates) were too long. They knew each other's projects well, and they could have been gotten one-on-one for more detailed information.

The timeline. I spent the majority of the summer collecting information. I've spent far less time analyzing data and feel rushed to complete the report.

## **Comments from Community Partners**

“Clear roles and expectations are needed for everyone involved in these policy change projects.”

“Appropriate research methods are needed for the specific requirements of each project.”

“Community volunteers want to be more involved and support is needed for their participation.”

“A balanced approach between the community and university is needed to ensure that the research is community relevant and ethically sound.”

“Preparation of proposals for ethics review and approval takes a lot of time.”

“The interns spent a lot of time educating people about the projects to gain their participation in the research.”

“Time is needed to connect with communities before the work can be done.”

“We need to keep working on the issues in the coming months.”

“This is time demanding for community partners who are volunteers.”

“Interviews in themselves were capacity building for community participants.”

“Engage the community at large in this policy change work.”

“It takes several things working together at once to impact policy.”

“All were satisfied with the internships. The interns were described as flexible, connected and energetic.”

“Projects are a work in progress and need further work to follow-up.”

“Good communication between community partners, interns and RCIP project staff occurred and was essential.”

“Communities connecting with each other is a benefit of these projects.”

“Identify do-able tasks and be clear about expectations at the beginning.”

“Earlier ethics approval would provide more time for the research and follow-up.”

## **Conclusions**

Overall the project was successful in achieving the goals of utilizing student interns to engage the communities involved in policy research and development.

As the program evolved it became apparent that graduate students who had already attained knowledge of sociological research methods were much more effective than interns with little or no similar educational experience.

Service learning is an effective tool to foster leadership development. For it to be effective in benefiting both the community and the student a carefully thought out process of contextual understanding, development of research and facilitation skills and engagement of the community partners in the process maximizes the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Success requires obtaining research ethics approval for the research at the beginning of the project to give more time for the research. Support for community engagement is best achieved by finding the key community people who make a difference to get involved in the project. Connection with the major project partners, in this instance the Coastal Communities Network and the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre, gives legitimacy to the communities while clarity of projects goals and roles of participants is important for success.

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