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A Different Take on Data: Assessment as a Service-Learning Focus

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Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning
Early View

Abstract: Through the lens of assessment as a form of service-learning, this case example provides insight into the initiation and implementation of data-oriented skills and career competencies through an interdisciplinary Honors College undergraduate course. Utilizing service-learning principles as the guiding framework, key steps are outlined to highlight positive practices that informed the early and ongoing course development to emphasize the application of assessment skills in a client-focused environment. Recommendations for creating experiential learning structures to be adapted across varied institutional types are also shared.

Keywords: *Service Learning, Assessment, Honors College, Reflection, Capstone Project*

Introduction

A cursory review of the literature on “service-learning” and “assessment” highlights a variety of practices and methods to assess service-learning practices (Driscoll et al., 1996; Molee et al., 2010; Toncar et al., 2006). However, this publication focuses on assessment as a form of service-learning in that project purpose, data collection, analyses, and reporting principles are incorporated into a project developed specifically in conjunction with identified non-profit organizations. Through a creative collaboration between an Honors College advisor with a focus on service-learning coordination, and an instructor teaching higher education assessment graduate courses in the College of Education, this “assessment as service-learning” course (“SCHC 480: Data Advocacy: Supporting Non-Profits with Assessment”) at the University of South Carolina (USC) has experienced several successes and suggested ideas for adaptation across other institutions. The process of creating the course with supportive data evidence is shared to further illustrate the power of collaborative risks and the value of establishing a class with benefits to non-profit organizations and students’ developing knowledge and skills.

Furthermore, with the increasing focus on career readiness in undergraduate education, this course highlights ways students can develop and apply workplace skills deemed highly desirable in college graduates (for example, National Association of Colleges and Employers, n.d.).

Literature Review

For purposes of the course and context, service-learning (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996) is defined as including the key components of a) being course-based or credit-bearing in nature, b) focus on an organized service activity meeting identified community needs, and c) reflection on the service to enhance learning and understanding of civic responsibilities. Service-learning represents one type of a high-impact practice, experiences that generally have demonstrated strong gains for college students aligned with institutional metrics, such as retention and graduation, as well as professional, academic, and engagement outcomes (Kuh, 2008). Specific to service-learning, the benefits of participating are well-noted and include deeper learning and improved social and interpersonal skills (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013), as well as gains in civic consciousness and social awareness (Celio et al., 2011).

As part of a systematic analysis by Salam et al. (2019), the authors explored how service-learning was described across various academic disciplines and how reflection was embedded in the experiences. Of note, professional programs were identified as the most frequent entities to embed service-learning (for example, health sciences, business) while few examples denoted the purposeful incorporation of interdisciplinary backgrounds of students. An analysis of service-learning frameworks found that those with strong theoretical backing embedded key reflection steps [for example, experiential learning theories by Dewey (1938) and Kolb (1984)]. Salam et al. (2019) also found that the framework focus was often on specific curricular content areas. Depending upon the institutional context, service-learning can include a variety of structures and modes of implementation.

Higher education assessment focuses on several key actions, such as collecting, analyzing, and using evidence to advance teaching, student success, and educational experiences (Suskie, 2018). Related to higher education assessment, a thematic analysis of course syllabi focused on higher education graduate courses found assessment design and data collection to be heavily emphasized, as well as the teaching of diverse methodologies (ACPA Commission for Assessment and Evaluation, 2024). Furthermore, the authors noted that experience levels of students tend to be quite varied, and care should be taken to adapt content to early novice learners. For this example, the adaptation of higher education assessment to an undergraduate course on service-learning provided various ways to refresh traditional modes of content application. For instance, students enrolled in the course learned assessment skills and applied them specifically to their client projects. Course topics were also emphasized through discussions focused on the students' lived experiences completing course evaluations and campus surveys, including reviewing various survey and focus group instruments.

Studies have noted that students acknowledging assessment methods emphasizing learner-focused strategies, and being visible through mixed methods, were most beneficial (Flores et al., 2015; Pereira, Niklasson & Flores, 2017). Embedding action-based projects, such as a client-based assessment project, is not unfamiliar to higher education (Biddix, 2013); yet, the course's application within an interdisciplinary undergraduate and assessment-focused context is novel.

Institutional and Course Context

The service-learning course resides at the University of South Carolina-Columbia, a large institution focused on “very high research activity” (R1) that also holds the Carnegie Foundation’s recognition of Elective Community Engagement Classification. Furthermore, in Fall 2025, USC hit a high mark of 30,000+ enrolled undergraduate students (Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Analytics, University of South Carolina). At the same time, The South Carolina Honors College enrolls close to 2400 undergraduate students with nearly 600 courses offered for an approximate enrollment of 16 students per course (A. Tanner, personal communication, August 11, 2025). Students typically declare academic majors within USC, with the largest number of Honors College students represented through USC’s College of Arts and Sciences. The course, SCHC 480: Data Advocacy Supporting Non-Profits with Assessment, is a three-credit hour course, and includes a course description as follows:

This course will provide students with the knowledge and skills to support community-based organizations understand and apply findings from collected data to advance their non-profit missions. The course will focus on reflection skills and the application of qualitative and quantitative assessment principles, analyses, and recommendations by working directly with a community non-profit organization throughout the semester culminating in a final group project presentation and report submission.

The SCHC 480 course is targeted primarily to junior- and senior-level students, and typically includes a variety of academic majors, thus highlighting a strongly interdisciplinary representation across student academic interests.

Creation of Service-Learning Class Focused on Assessment Methods

For context, the emerging service-learning class first developed as a result of familiarity and success of a graduate course in the master’s degree program in Higher Education and Student Affairs at the University of South Carolina. The course features readings, podcasts, articles, and discussions designed to help students engage more critically in their day-to-day work, and to consider how they may be able to enact tangible change in their workplaces through data. It also provides them with essential skills they will use in their future careers: data collection and interpretation, interpersonal connection, critical thinking, and reflection as a form of contextualization. In the fall of 2020, both authors sat in this Assessment in Higher Education classroom. One was the instructor, the other a student. Just about a year later, they would partner up again to discuss bringing this same idea to the undergraduate classroom under a new helm: supporting non-profits with assessment.

Honors College Perspective

Honors College students are required to complete a “beyond the classroom” experience in order to graduate from the program, which can be satisfied through research, study abroad, internships, or service-learning. The service-learning courses in particular are designed to pull double duty for students’ degree requirements, often counting toward their progression in not only the Honors College but also their majors, minors, or general education (termed “Carolina Core” at USC). This requires the courses to not only be exciting and relevant in material, but also satisfy the needs of

the students within the Honors College. Areas for growth in 2021 included highlighting math courses that could work for the humanities-minded students, developing more STEM options to engage students in majors that often did not orient themselves towards service-learning, and expanding the faculty network of the Honors College even further than it had been before.

One of the authors completed the proposed course as a graduate assessment class in the higher education and student affairs master's program in the College of Education. They recommended the course idea after recalling their experiences with data management, community building, and finding your "niche" in your field. This new experience represented an opportunity to allow high-ability students to engage in much the same way, making slight tweaks to create a course more suitable for the undergraduate population. By working with non-profits, students would be able to expand their network beyond their typical bounds of the university and potentially engage in the material of the course even deeper after the semester ended. Additionally, by nature of being available to undergraduates, the course would be open to students of all majors, a stark contrast from the education-minded students in the graduate version.

Tagging this course under the helm of "service-learning" did not seem particularly revolutionary at the time, because the course itself checks many of the requirements set forth both by the Honors College and other service-learning entities. The Honors College ascribes to the definition of service-learning set forth by the National Youth Leadership Council (formerly the National Service Learning Clearinghouse): "Service-learning is a type of experiential learning that drives students' academic interests and passion toward addressing real community needs... For service-learning to be successful, teachers must intentionally design it to meet desired outcomes such as academic, civic, and social emotional learning" ("Service Learning", n.d.). This notion of engaging in work based around a *community-identified* need is of exceptional importance to the vision of service-learning established by the Honors College; in this course, the clients have full control over the kind of assessment for which they are looking, and they participate in the course on an opt-in basis. As such, the students are consistently meeting that goal by providing a service that meets a need set forth by the clients.

Additionally, honors service-learning courses are defined by their consistent and intentional reflection, the opportunity to participate in a culminating assignment, and completing the pre-defined service for at least 20 hours. Once again, this course checked each of these boxes, as reflection and the final client presentation were important principles of the original graduate model, and students completed likely far more than their mandated 20 hours both within and outside of the classroom to support the goals of their particular organizations.

Assessment and Data Advocacy Perspective

In the syllabus planning and design of the data advocacy service-learning course, several elements from the existing higher education assessment class were adapted. For example, skill development in the areas of data collection, analysis, and reporting were emphasized during the first half of the semester for each course. Along with discussions on emerging topics in assessment and data science, the second half of the semester focused on the major group capstone project. Both courses emphasized experiential learning through embedded application opportunities in the

class. For the graduate students, the goal was preparation for a career in higher education with a strong understanding of the articulation and implementation of assessment into collegiate-based programs and initiatives. For the undergraduate data advocacy course, the goal was for students from a variety of academic disciplines to walk away with an understanding of non-profit organizations and associated service-learning principles (Table 1). Furthermore, the students learned skills related to assessment design and actions surrounding data efforts, including the analysis and sharing of information. For both classes, these respective goals were effectively achieved through the capstone project working with external clients.

Table 1

Service-Learning Visibility in Data Advocacy Course

Service-Learning Elements (Duffy et al., 2011)	Expressed in Data Advocacy Course
1. Working with external group or agency to meet course goals and objectives	-Instructor identifies non-profit agencies in advance of the course offering. -Early meetings focus on scope and scale of suggested projects in relation to course content and goals.
2. Meeting an authentic community need	-Instructor authenticates identified needs through communications with agency. -Key goal is to ensure data or assessment need is visible at juncture of course offering.
3. Iterative reflection with continued connections between service and course topics	-Individual student reflections are submitted throughout the term utilizing DEAL critical reflection model (Ash & Clayton, 2009)
4. Reciprocity with a community partner	-Capstone project infuses expectations for students to seek understanding of organization and support for societal challenges moving forward through connections to personal, academic, and professional goals.

Identifying Participating Non-Profit Organizations

For the undergraduate course, finding the non-profit organizations to serve as the “clients” was a critical first step in creating a successful course. In the early semesters, the authors leveraged connections in the city of Columbia and the campus to help in the identification of potential clients. This included sending a brief explanation about the course through local non-profit organization listservs and creating customized outreach to various organizational leaders informing them of the course design. Once non-profit organizations expressed their interest, the instructor provided a course description and examples of potential and past projects so that clients could understand the expectations. The instructor also asked organizations to share details about their expressed need for data and assessment support. Anecdotally, all participating organizations communicated that

assessment technical skill and general bandwidth was lacking (for example, needs surveys, benchmarking, data for strategic planning). Selected organizations submitted an abstract describing the data project, including purpose and identified problem statements, and a contact person that will serve as the associated student group's communication point for the semester.

As students' ability to enroll in the course began in the semester prior to its offering, the instructor maintained a close eye on the anticipated number of student groups (typically consisting of 4-5 individuals), and the number of client projects that could have been supported. It should be noted the course instructor also created the client groups based upon a combination of students' self-identified technical skills with data (including collection, analysis, writing, and visual articulation) as well as academic discipline to ensure a robust combination of expertise was represented in each group. This self-assessment typically occurred during the first day of class with an assigned reading and subsequent class discussion to help reiterate the types of knowledge, skills, and experiences students could reference for the course. This process helped to ensure expectations were met by the clients, and that student group size supported the scope and scale of the identified projects.

Meeting an Authentic Community Need.

As briefly noted, participating non-profit organizations have described data and assessment support as an area of need within their industries. Some groups noted that the professional backgrounds of current employees and motivations for engaging in non-profit efforts often do not always coalesce with technical skills associated with data and assessment (Bozzo, 2000; Forbes, 1998). As awareness of the data advocacy course emerged, additional organizations shared their desire to serve as a client in the course. A major takeaway for universities is the untapped opportunity to match students from data science and related majors with local communities to address societal challenges through conversations around data and evidence.

Reciprocity with a Community Partner.

A unique distinction between community service and service-learning involves reciprocity with a community partner through intentional connections to academic curriculum goals (Asghar & Rowe, 2016). As noted in Table 1, reciprocity is one of the four key criteria of service-learning that were applied to the Honors College data advocacy course, and the participating non-profit organizations noted the somewhat lacking expertise related to data and assessment in their field. To help students become familiar with their assigned non-profit organization and to help initiate relationships with their identified contact, student groups were encouraged to visit the non-profit organization's site early during the semester and through dedicated class time. Students reported this step was helpful to better understand the respective organization's purpose and "feel," and they felt more comfortable initiating future communications and questions with their client. One observation involves the way the assessment projects were designed in a way to address an articulated problem from the client. Participating students were compelled to become increasingly knowledgeable about the non-profit organization and their needs to develop appropriate instruments and collect data to provide recommendations in addressing the stated problem. This type of "deep dive" is essential in quality assessment design but became emphasized as motivation for the student groups to best support the client's needs.

Iterative Reflection Throughout Course

An expected component of service-learning involves reflection and the course instructor included several multi-modal methods for reflection to occur throughout the semester. Using the DEAL model of Reflection (Ash & Clayton, 2009), students were asked to submit individual reflections at key junctures in the semester. For example, the first reflection occurred very early in the semester so that students could identify key knowledge and skills from prior classes and experience, and to share anticipated personal learning goals for the project, including the sharing of anticipated concerns. The DEAL model suggests a sequential format of key questions (“Describe..., Evaluate..., and Articulate Learning”), with the ability to focus on participants’ personal, academic, and/or professional goals through the associated reflection prompts. Students were also encouraged to pursue reflection in ways that are less traditional than the typical written response. For example, an emerging university initiative (e.g., Quality Enhancement Plan) provided resources on video reflections, audio reflections, and student-friendly language to help make reflection seem increasingly accessible and relevant.

The instructor highlighted these resources early in the semester and dedicated class time to students exploring them and practicing responses to provided reflection prompts. The culminating reflective assignment was evaluated with a vetted rubric, and all students “met expectations” (average of 3.0+ on a 4 points scale) as it related to the learning outcomes by the end of the semester. Anecdotally, the instructor observed students’ confidence in their own reflection skills grow as they practiced them over time, as well as an increased interest in continuing reflection as they customized their work to preferred mediums. Furthermore, the depth in learning became more evident throughout the duration of the semester as early submissions appeared more surface-level or expected in nature. Later submissions showed students challenging early assumptions about their projects and non-profit organizations while also articulating deeper meaning-making in relation to their chosen academic majors and career paths. This sentiment is shared by a participating student when asked about their learning: “My biggest takeaway was how empowering and enlightening it can be to work with a nonprofit. There are many avenues and majors that can work with nonprofits.”

Career Competencies Development

In addition to the client capstone project and reflective exercises, the data advocacy service-learning course focused on the significance of the politics and ethics of data (Mayer, 2019), socially just assessment principles (McArthur, 2016), and emphasis on career competencies through course design (Gray, 2021). Because the course included a variety of academic majors, the direction of course discussions based upon class readings and activities was robust. For example, data science and more technical majors viewed the topics in different ways than the social sciences and humanities majors. While this finding may not be as surprising, the key takeaway of “cross-pollinating” academic majors within client projects proved to be very fruitful as well. Questions developed through the survey design and focus groups in a way that was far more representative of various disciplines, and the projects benefited as a result.

Furthermore, a poster and infographic were developed by each group to be presented and shared

during the capstone class poster session. Students with little assessment or data experience could contribute in new ways based on the formatting and design focus of these tangible products, often contributing through their academic discipline. In these moments, the students with a more technical expertise background could transition to more of the “learner” as their peers held new leadership roles within the group. This seemingly small structural design to the group formation contributed greatly to the development of career competencies, especially those deemed to be most valuable by employers as noted in Table 2.

Table 2

Career Competency Development (as adapted from NACE: Student and Employer Ratings ([The Gap in Perceptions of New Grads' Competency Proficiency and Resources to Shrink It](#)):

Selected competencies rated important for career readiness by Employers:	Examples of How Competencies were Addressed through Data Advocacy Course
Communication	-Meeting with client to learn more about the non-profit organization, goals, and project focus -Developing key roles focused on communication (liaison to client, liaison to course instructor, lead communicator within group) -Updating materials and methodology with evolutions to project
Critical Thinking	-Being flexible to client needs for project -Addressing challenges in data collection (e.g., low response rate) -Developing solid recommendations for client based upon collected data; evidence-based decision-making -Navigating evolution in project design with client project members
Equity & Inclusion	-Variety of academic majors/disciplines, and perspectives represented in group membership -Emphasizing reciprocity principles in service-learning; considerations for client goals and needs -Infusing socially just assessment principles into project (e.g., demographic questions in surveys, formation of recommendations)
Professionalism	-Interactions with client and course instructor throughout semester -Maintaining confidentiality and appropriate interpretation of collected data -Appropriate dress and preparation for poster presentation on last class day open to campus and community -Development of high-quality products (poster, infographic, and detailed report) for clients' continued use past class
Teamwork	-Collaboration across team members with little prior knowledge of one another or class project -Assigning roles and holding each other accountable for responsibilities -Presenting as group to our class on current progress during assigned class days -Making collective informed decisions to ultimately benefit client and project

Final Client Project

The culminating project of this course required students to work in small groups, partnering with a client assigned at the beginning of the semester, with the goal of providing a functional, data-driven solution to a challenge their client may be facing. This assignment serves as the prism through which all course material was funneled, allowing students to reflect frequently and consistently while also helping them apply theory to practice.

Based on the needs of their client, students were able to engage in different types of assessment. This opportunity allowed students to collaborate when facing similar challenges, while also gaining insight into other forms of data collection, including their inherent benefits and detractions. Instructor intervention was limited in this portion of the course; although there were check-in meetings administered to ensure students were progressing as needed, students were empowered to create their own internal deadlines, divide work as deemed necessary, and determine best practices for achieving their final product. The instructor also regularly connected with clients as a liaison between the students and projects to help ensure appropriate project progress and non-profit organization interests were being met.

The final submissions had the most specific guidelines to ensure consistency. Students were required to produce a poster, visual aid, executive summary, and detailed report, in addition to a personal reflection paper about the project. At the end of the term, the teams presented their posters in a showcase where community partners, the clients themselves, and other campus stakeholders were invited to attend and ask questions. See below for examples of real client projects from previous sections of this course.

Example 1: United Way of the Midlands and the Midlands Reading Consortium. The goal of this project was to identify ways to recruit and retain male and young professional volunteers to participate in education and resiliency programs. The assigned student group actions focused on a review of existing data on past participants, collecting survey data about potential barriers, and suggested recommendations based upon the findings. Utilizing a population of current USC undergraduate students and convenience sampling techniques, key project findings highlighted fraternity and sorority life members as potential volunteers based upon program expectations, and male study participants, particularly in teaching and service professions, expressed a higher rate of volunteer interest.

Example 2: The Midlands American Heart Association (AHA). Based upon existing health data, it was found that the local community has a majority obese population, and the AHA sought methods that would be effective in attracting donor support through a benchmarking study. The assigned student group developed a survey instrument to ascertain what elements of donor support would be most beneficial to the client, completed outreach to identified non-profits to gather associated information, and developed recommendations based upon the collected data. Key recommendations highlighted stronger use of social media to drive awareness of AHA, including recognizing individuals who contributed efforts as donors.

Findings

To better understand the efficacy of the service component of the service-learning courses, the Honors College administers assessments of their own to each class. Students complete this survey in addition to their course evaluation, which offers a view of both critical elements of these courses. The service-oriented assessment included Likert scale responses (ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree) and open-ended responses.

The Honors data advocacy course was offered for the first time in the fall of 2022. That year, the course had tremendous results, with 100% of students agreeing that the service experience helped them better understand the course material (compared to 87% for all service-learning courses combined). Additionally, 80% of students agreed they had a better understanding of what it means to participate in community services, which was on par with the 78% found in the aggregate departmental service-learning results. Of note, the questions about reflection (“Reflection activities were a frequent component of this course” and “Reflection activities helped me make connections between course material and my service experience”) scored higher for the data advocacy course than the department (100% to 92% agreement and 94% to 85% agreement, respectively). Lastly, a question posed about the ability to interact with other students more so than in a non-Honors course score scored higher for the data advocacy course (avg. 5 score compared to avg. 4.83 on 5-point agreement scale).

In the open-ended responses, students had the chance to elaborate on some of these earlier findings; one student noted that one of their main takeaways was that “service-learning is a relationship that goes both ways,” underlining how reciprocity factors into community-based work. Another student shared, “Community service backed by data is so powerful. Instead of blindly volunteering [or] donating, [the ability to fill] the gaps in the community has a much bigger and [more] meaningful impact.”

The second offering of this course occurred in spring of 2024. The quantitative data remained similar, and students continued to share positive reactions to the course; in particular, one student wrote, “Assessment is so different than I originally thought... I feel like I learned more in this class than many others combined. It gave us so much experience.”

Recommendations For Implementation

As the assessment-based service-learning course became realized through one campus example, we have some recommendations for how to implement these concepts in other institutional settings. First, the collaborative partnership between the academic department and instructor can be significant. In this case, both parties were willing to take a calculated risk to initiate a new course based upon the shared vision for assessment and service-learning. They were also willing to lean into one another for support in areas such as student and client recruitment, service-learning curriculum, marketing of capstone poster events, and learning through course feedback on ways to improve. Additionally, during pivotal moments in the semester, concerted efforts were made to identify helpful strategies to answer client and student questions, and if needed, seek additional guidance within the campus to help in the response.

Moving forward, it is recommended to gather structured formative and summative feedback from participating non-profit organizations to ensure reciprocity principles and continuous improvement characteristics are being met, and to help with future course planning. In addition, potential participating non-profit organizations are encouraged to be identified in a variety of ways, including through advisory boards or those connected through community engagement spaces. As these collaborative relationships between the university and the non-profit organizations become established, so does the potential for lasting partnerships extending into other domains. Furthermore, because students in the course have established relationships with a local non-profit organization, they may continue working with key community partners for service opportunities, or alternatively utilize their course experiences to extend outreach to other non-profit organizations. Lastly, it should be noted that through some creative adjustments and ensuring service-learning principles are embedded, higher education assessment skills can be a great way to advance the efforts of non-profit organizations and their missions, particularly in the areas of fulfilling grant reporting expectations or increasing potential donor support by providing compelling data. It should be noted that several clients have asked to continue in their capacity in future semesters, especially as impending internal deadlines or continuation of current class projects merit further assessment support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this case example provided insight into the early development and process of implementing an Honors College service-learning course through the lens of higher education assessment. The literature acknowledged few examples that highlight similar examples in the field, and as such potential considerations for adaptation in other teaching settings emerged. Specifically, guiding frameworks, data findings, and recommendations for implementation were described in ways to prioritize potential methods. The power of collaborative partnerships and a willingness to be adaptable to emerging topics and challenges, along with a commitment to quality experiences for participating students and non-profit organizations, were critical to the overall success of the development of this course. Furthermore, by emphasizing specific knowledge and skills in connection to emerging college student career competencies, the learning environment leveraged opportunities for reflection on personal and professional growth.

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