Notes from consultation with Robert Bringle, May 5, 2015 at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC.

The overall takeaway from my 4+ hour visit with Bob Bringle is this: Service learning is a pedagogy that if presented in the right way (ie clearly and consistently) will “sell” itself to faculty and administrators, and to some degree to students and community partners as well. If a university holds as a value the desire to foster civic responsibility and engagement in students, and a sense of democratic identity (as Xavier does) then service learning is unique and unparalleled in its proven ability to achieve these outcomes.

Now a list of more specific points (in the order in which they came up through our discussion or from my questions). In some cases I take Bob’s information and present it here in a way that more specifically pertains to Xavier’s situation. Therefore some of this language is me speaking to me (or to CAT):

* Our FRSM goals are course goals, and not learning outcomes, and therefore more difficult to apply to service learning (SL) projects, and to measure. One thing that FRSM can do to unify and strengthen the SL component is to draft common learning outcomes to use in the spring semester. Through common outcomes, things like civic growth, personal growth, and academic growth can be graded and assessed. One way to apply common outcomes is to use them to tailor reflection prompts (common or otherwise). The formal reflections then can be used to generate learning as well as to assess it. Reflection for generating learning should be used before, during, and after the SL project, not just after. (Bob gave me some examples of reflections tied to outcomes for a psychology SL project, which we can use as models.)
* Xavier’s upcoming changes at the top of administration may be a good opportunity to reexamine the nature and structure of SL at Xavier.
* Xavier’s current structure of a split SL house between student affairs and academic affairs certainly presents some challenges, but this structure can also provide some benefits. One way to capitalize on the arrangement is to focus on similarities in the goals and purposes of each piece. Student affairs (our Office of Student Leadership and Service) takes a holistic approach to education (as SL encourages) and promotes values such as leadership as part of university education. We may reexamine the goals and outcomes of OSLS with the purpose of identifying common ground with the goals and outcomes of a given course, of a program such as FRSM, of a center such as CAT, and of the school as a whole.
* Another potential benefit to this split arrangement is to integrate the academic piece with the advantages the student affairs piece might already have, such as access to alumni, alumni publications, online and other marketing platforms, or the OSLS support for STEM education. For instance, how does OSLS support STEM, and does, or can, SL support STEM in a similar way?
* One way to strengthen SL at Xavier and to work toward a culture of SL on campus (which is an ultimate goal) is to support faculty in ways they might deem expedient (although not in the sense of improper or immoral, just practical and convenient. This support could take the form of faculty learning communities (or groups of SL “champions” or those interested in SL, maybe different groups for those in different degrees of involvement). The FRSM fellows that begins next year could be an important resource as they discuss the role of SL in FRSM. Other forms of support can be resource guides/materials available online, and model reflection assignments and syllabi. (Although a host of SL syllabi are already available in a few places online, perhaps we should select a choice few to highlight and promote as effective models.)
* Following up on the first point in the last bullet, targeting faculty in different degrees of involvement in SL is a good idea. Also, targeting faculty in different stages of their careers in another good idea. New faculty may be more receptive to SL, but less willing to stray from what they see as their path to tenure. Newly tenured faculty may be looking for ways to continue to advance their teaching and to develop professionally. Long-tenured faculty may experience burnout with lecture-driven pedagogy, or may seek a way to instill more practical, more civic, more experiential outcomes into courses they’ve taught for a long time. Faculty near the end of their careers may see SL as a way to renew and reenergize one last time.
* Following up from the last bullet, the more options we give faculty, then the more we facilitate the direction they wan to go, then the better. The strongest and most sustainable progress a school can make in SL is driven by faculty (their ideas, their excitement, their design, their experience), not from a push by an office or a center. We only need to facilitate this drive by offering targeted groups chances to meet and discuss, and by promoting and highlighting good work being done. Always tied to the mission. Always tied to faculty development.
* Following up on the last bullet, some options we might present to the new FRSM cohort are to design some outcomes tied to the course goals, to assess and evaluate the usefulness of the outcomes after a period of time, and to present their findings in a journal or in conferences such as the Gulf South Summit.
* Another measure we can take in conjunction with the OSLS is to survey our community partners after they’ve engaged with Xavier faculty and students. This could help show partners that we value their roles as co-educators (foster reciprocity), could encourage faculty to become more involved in developing and implementing projects (e.g. encourage them to be present on site), and the information garnered could be used to prompt further faculty development. This community partners survey could be handled in ten questions. A write up of the results could look like, we get good feedback from partners when X happens.
* Another approach to supporting faculty is simply to ask them what information we could collect that would be useful to them. The goal here is to generate useful, generalizable knowledge that can be shared. A case-study alone is not as useful as a broader institutional look at a bunch of projects.
* In any case, we need a much better sense of what SL projects are happening across the campus, in what departments, at what course level, and with what community partners. We need something like a map of this information that can be shared with the purpose of encouraging faculty and departments. (This is probably the place to begin for us. We need an approach to gathering this. Does OSLS have something like this? What information do they have?)
* For a school-wide culture to establish, the larger faculty must be aware of the successes with SL in the first-year course (FRSM). There is literature on the value and success of first-year courses, which can be useful. But also the teachers of FRSM need to speak on their SL experience. We need to look at what can be learned from faculty teaching experiences, even the bad ones? We might also benefit from knowing larger faculty perceptions of SL in FRSM.
* Another point of leverage with larger faculty and with administration is accreditation, which often includes a civic component, and a component involving civic communication skills.
* Back to developing faculty, identifying departmental successes and having them speak to department colleagues on SL benefits is a key. Bringing in faculty from a particular department at other schools to speak to a department here is another way. Obviously home-grown success is more persuasive. Faculty can be brought to SL through opportunities to advance research, service, or teaching. We only need to present these opportunities as such. Toward this we may ask faculty to reflect on their service as a text, through the lens of their own discipline. But it all starts with knowing who is doing what at Xavier and where.
* With the College of Pharmacy, continue as we did to help them differentiate between SL and applied learning or engaged learning.
* Another point of school-wide leverage may be through the core curriculum, if we can demonstrate how curriculum is enhanced through SL. The strategic planning council may also want to hear about mutually beneficial community engagement.
* To sum up: We need to engage the whole school (as many working parts as possible) on the research-proven benefits of SL to enhance curriculum and to produce civic-oriented outcomes. We need to target faculty for development more specifically, based on their current degree of involvement (Bob offers the scale of already-curious-indifferent-hostile) and on their career stage. And we need to gain a better sense (a map) of what’s already taking place here and use that information strategically.