

Service Learning, Civic Engagement, and Homeland Security: What are the Connections?

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Service learning is an educational process that promotes civic engagement, providing a powerful approach to developing good citizenship practices. This presentation will demonstrate how engaging students in the important tasks of addressing issues on homeland security and domestic preparedness further enables students to become active contributors to society, helping them to develop a sense of civic and social responsibility. The collection of various individuals' work involved in a new service learning grant initiative offers a practical model of how homeland security and domestic preparedness activities can be incorporated into the curriculum, with strategies that are easily replicated by other colleges and schools.

Through funding from the *Supporting Actions for Engagement (SAFE)* grant, Raritan Valley Community College's (RVCC) Service Learning Homeland Security Project is creating opportunities that bring together students, faculty, and community members who study the impacts and problems associated with the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Students then prepare final products and services for organizations based on community needs.

Because service learning is compatible with academic and educational outcomes, it is part of the classroom experience at Raritan Valley Community College, and efforts are made to support new faculty initiatives for curriculum development. Through funding from the SAFE grant, several small faculty stipends have assisted with incorporating homeland security thematic issues into academic courses.

In initial planning for course development to address the community impact of September 11, 2001, the following RVCC academic departments were identified for participation in the project: Health Science Education, Early Childhood Education, Science and Engineering, and Business and Public Service. Key faculty members from these departments agreed to serve as project leaders responsible for developing a curriculum that addresses the issues of public safety and emergency preparedness. As part of the service learning assignment, students who are enrolled in project courses are required to research various topics related to homeland security and domestic preparedness and then to independently develop a product or service from their findings that can be widely disseminated to the community-at-large. These can include, but are not limited to, informational brochures, videotapes, web sites, community resource directories, presentations of reports to special groups, and development of various homeland security service activities.

The primary course outcome of the SAFE project is the involvement of faculty from at least six disciplines responsible for the following:

- 1) Engaging students in approximately twenty hours of service learning activities that emphasize homeland security and emergency preparedness issues.
- 2) Developing model syllabi that demonstrate the importance of understanding homeland security and the connection between service learning and good citizenship practices.

There is no single model of integrating service into academic study that fits all disciplines. Instead, there are a variety of options that offer faculty and students the flexibility to achieve course objectives.

Four faculty members (two from Early Childhood Education and two from Nursing disciplines) served as project faculty leaders responsible for integrating service learning with homeland security topics into their courses during the first semester of the project. Following are three course project descriptions:

Trends in Nursing

Students worked in groups of five to research a homeland security topic related to health care targeted at specific populations such as the elderly, pregnant women, and young children. Students then matched their findings with particular community organizations needing assistance and collaborated with organization staff to develop a service project. The final products and services they developed were disseminated to the larger community through workshops, information brochures, fact sheets, and training sessions.

Foundations of Early Childhood Education

Students observed pre-school and kindergarten classes, reviewed literature on the social and emotional needs of young children during a crisis, and interviewed school staff to discuss existing emergency plans and needs of child care centers. Based on their findings, students developed unit plans for the schools to help children face emergencies. They also shared the plans with staff and parents.

Children's Literature

Students wrote, illustrated, and prepared an original children's book based around homeland security and domestic preparedness topics for young children. Students then shared their work with other college students and children in K-3 grades.

Drawing on the interest and expertise of faculty from diverse disciplines is part of an on-going recruitment effort, and building a critical mass of faculty involvement from different disciplines has been part of the SAFE planning process. These efforts have engaged other faculty from different disciplines who included a service learning homeland security component in their courses. Examples of two projects are:

- Students enrolled in Human Service and Communication courses were trained by the American Red Cross to disseminate their *Together We Prepare* program. The program includes a 30 minute presentation that enhances people's abilities to prepare for and respond to any disaster or emergency. It includes a PowerPoint presentation, brochures and survey that encourage citizens to take five action steps which are: making a plan, building a kit, getting trained, volunteering and giving blood. Presentations were made to various groups such as clubs, churches, nursing homes, after-school programs and schools.
- Students enrolled in two sections of a Torts course researched the rights and liabilities of both government agencies and volunteers if the volunteer refuses to respond to an emergent call. The students developed materials that can serve as guidance to townships, municipalities, and charitable organizations.

An important goal in the project's development is to work with the local community, and a major effort has been focused on creating new service learning opportunities, identifying new partnerships and deepening existing relationships with community organizations. A number of strategies have been used, and one successful technique includes the dissemination of work performed by service learning students from project classes. The achievement of this goal is best illustrated by the many students enrolled in the project class, *Trends in Nursing*, who have chosen to offer assistance to community organizations and their clients by providing advocacy, research, and direct and indirect service. Their student-initiated projects are varied and include the following examples:

1. Working collaboratively with the American Red Cross, students developed pamphlets and brochures in both English and Spanish, explaining what biological weapons are and how they impact our local community.
2. Students created a CHAT program (Communicating Honestly about Terrorism) to increase awareness of the mental health component of terrorism, to empower seniors with information, and to lessen anxiety by talking. The program format encompassed an initial presentation of information followed by a discussion group centered on employing therapeutic communication for the elderly.
3. Students served at local schools and learned what plans are in place for dealing with the threat of biological weapons. Based on their needs assessment, the students created a 24-Hour Medication Record for the school to use.

The focus of SAFE project courses encourages student learning about homeland security and emergency preparedness. Students reflect on the developmental aspects of their service and link the service experience with the academic content of the course. Students provide a minimum of 20 hours of service, which is done in lieu of other course requirements such as a term paper or final exam. Students reflect on the service through various exercises that include journaling, essay writing, in-class discussions, role playing or a reflective paper to identify community issues and problems.

For example, the partnership created between the American Red Cross and students enrolled in the Human Service and Communication project classes provided opportunities for student leadership. Students enrolled in the classes were asked to modify the Red Cross safety presentation to suit the needs of particular populations they addressed, such as the elderly or youth. In addition to engaging students in the design of their project, many students reported that the project gave them a heightened sense of self-worth and increased their interpersonal skills.

To further define the topic of service learning, civic engagement, and homeland security, a partnership with law enforcement was created by involving the *Somerset Police Academy*. The *Somerset Police Academy*, a division of the College's Corporate and Continuing Education, is housed on the RVCC campus. For the purpose of the grant, the Executive Director of the Police Academy met with community members and asked them to develop a current issue related to homeland security. Each community member, called a facilitator, subsequently met with teams of police recruits to develop a Homeland Security Capstone Project. The community facilitators represented various community organizations such as youth groups, senior centers, health programs, security offices, and universities, enabling the police recruits to learn about the needs of different populations. The recruits created projects on topics ranging from understanding the mental health concerns in a post 9/11 society, to awareness and fear reduction for senior citizens regarding domestic terrorism.

The alliance with the *Somerset Police Academy* serves as a resource for civic engagement initiatives, as well as draws upon the resources of RVCC to achieve its educational and community objectives. This partnership helps to broaden the influence of the project and to promote the campus agenda for service learning, civic engagement, and homeland security.

Emphasizing issues of homeland security and domestic preparedness through service learning and civic engagement activities offers a way of teaching students how to become active, caring citizens. It validates the positive ways students can contribute to their communities by becoming leaders in solving public problems with community partners. Engaging students in confronting important societal issues through service learning and civic engagement projects can have profound and positive effects in many ways. Its impact on our communities can create a safer place to live and it has a vital role to play in empowering students to be part of the solution. Moreover, it adds meaning and relevance to a student's education.