



The Evolution of Service-Learning: One Community College's Vision

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General Description of the Session

The Academic Service-Learning Center (ASLC) at Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) is in a period of transformation from a volunteer-based program to an academic service-learning center. This presentation addresses programs that have to redesign themselves in the face of an undirected and/or apathetic volunteer history. How staff of the ASLC are changing to use the fundamentals of service-learning effectively and beginning to institutionalize academic service-learning throughout the college will be demonstrated by sharing program mistakes and accomplishments in the areas of building overall sustainability, institutionalizing efforts, and developing a shared vision. This session was motivated by the ASLC's transformation and recent publications which help to articulate best practices in determining indicators of engagement at community colleges, particularly those practices which report the benefits of taking an integrated systems approach to program mission and design.

To understand the transformation process at the GRCC ASLC, it is important to understand the history and current state of affairs of its programs. Until the 2000-2001 academic year, the GRCC service-learning center was part of the college's Student Activities Office (SAO). The physical separation of the service-learning center was designed to provide room for the program to begin developing an academic component that directly connected classroom content, student learning, and community need versus relying on a purely volunteer system. GRCC's President supported the move and such buy-in gave the center the momentum to begin looking at how it could become a more viable learning and community-oriented space for students, staff, and community.

While the separation from SAO to a space of its own did sever the physical ties between the center and its home as part of student life, the history of the center being the place to go for volunteer work remained. A few things were happening simultaneously as the center struggled to define itself outside of SAO:

1. The director had much investment in the Alternative Spring Break program which was the main focus of the Service Learning Advisory Board, a student organization.
2. The college had begun a scholar's program in 2001-02 to help faculty become familiar with the service-learning teaching method, so academic ties would be more prominent in the center's work.

By 2002–03, there was a name change to further move the center away from its past as a volunteer center. The new name was the Academic Service-Learning Center and reflected two significant changes: the word “Academic” was meant to imply that the center has a responsibility to student learning and the dash between the terms service and learning signifies the connection between serving in the community and learning that happens in the classroom. Traditionally, the center had been used as a place where students would complete paperwork and self-select community agency placements. The classroom connection was not necessarily part of the experience. By 2004–05, more changes developed in hopes of strengthening the center's academic focus; for example, in addition to the new space and name, the ASLC secured a faculty liaison and a liaison in training, a VISTA volunteer, an assistant director, a part-time administrative support person, and at least two work-study students. So the ASLC was finally ready to embark on a course that would take it away from random volunteering to an organized center with knowledgeable faculty, accountable work-study jobs, and classes that participated in service-learning projects designed to meet both educational and community needs.

There were still other problems with this new, young model of service-learning, however. In the summer of 2005, the director retired. In the fall, the center lost its VISTA position and had chronic internal office miscommunication and a campus-wide lack of understanding that the new center's focus on serving the community was tied to a close classroom connection. So for about a year, the center lacked leadership to move forward significantly on any of its plans to redefine itself. Then, in the winter semester of 2006, a new director, service-learning knowledgeable, was hired. Now the staff is in the midst of picking up the pieces. Even though many on campus and in the community are still uncertain of the center's exact direction and services, most recognize that academic service-learning is not a quick stop and shop for un-measurable student volunteer options.

The Current and Future Directions of the GRCC ASLC

At present, the ASLC continues to transition away from a volunteered-based program to an academically-based center. A new director has brought an energy and a commitment to help the center accomplish its mission, particularly through work on a strategic plan which includes additional support for current initiatives, but also supports new methods and opportunities to better serve our campus and community. Current and new initiatives include the following:

Neighborhood Clusters—New Initiative

Focusing on a concentrated group of schools and non-profit agencies in a few Grand Rapids neighborhoods which the center has had solid past relationships with will allow for building stronger partnerships and more integrated course design based on a course matrix model developed by Kapi'olani Community College. This neighborhood approach will also allow for greater tracking of program impact by moving away from a random student placement model.

Needs Assessments and Environmental Scans—New Initiative

The ASLC is developing much more comprehensive community needs assessment tools, procedures, and policies which allow for the exploration of both service-learning placement models and project and problem-based service opportunities with agencies and schools. These assessments and scans will also be coordinated with the development of plans to meet the Higher Learning Commission's accreditation requirements, particularly in the areas of Engagement and Service.

Collegiate Network—Current Initiative

The GRCC ASLC has spearheaded the formation of a regional network of Michigan Campus Compact colleges and universities to explore resources and services and to share best practices. The Grand Rapids Collegiate Network has applied for funding to do GIS mapping of service placements by colleges and universities in the region with the hope of better understanding the impact of volunteers and service-learners and of planning for regional engagement based on unique member program strengths.

Community Service Work Study (CSWS) Site Leaders—New Initiative

Because of staffing and strategic direction changes, the ASLC will reduce its total overall number of CSWS students in the next two years, but will begin to use the remaining students much more strategically as site leaders at targeted locations within neighborhood clusters. These students will serve as liaisons with other CSWS students and with faculty and students participating in academic service-learning courses with area agencies.

MidWest Campus Compact Citizen Fellows Program—Current Initiative

The ASLC will continue its participation in this multi-state civic engagement AmeriCorps grant program and will explore the use of M3C fellows as additional site leaders within neighborhood cluster organizations.

AmeriCorps VISTA—New Initiative

Michigan Campus Compact has provided the ASLC an opportunity to secure an AmeriCorps volunteer to support the work of the center as a coordinator of CSWS site leaders, a liaison to community partners in neighborhood clusters, and as a liaison with the GRCC Student Activities Office and the United Way of West Michigan to support ongoing student volunteer and civic initiatives. The VISTA will help non-academic service opportunities to be developed with these groups and to track them through an online Points of Light database. The VISTA will also be the primary liaison for the redevelopment of course-embedded Alternative Spring Break trips with students and faculty.

Advisory Board—New Initiative

The ASLC will be developing an advisory board consisting of faculty, staff, students, and community members to provide oversight and accountability for the work of the strategic plan. Among the sub-groups of the board will be an experiential learning council which will attempt to explore and integrate best practices and consistency among different types of experiential learning on campus, a civic engagement task force which will have as its initial charge to explore and define engagement activities for HLC accreditation purposes, and a faculty group to examine the place of service-learning in supporting the college's redefined General Learner Outcomes.

Faculty Training—Current Initiative

One pilot group has recently graduated the ASLC's first online BlackBoard Fundamentals of Service-Learning course which was taught by the center's faculty liaison. Follow-up courses to the introductory class will be developed in service-learning Course Planning and Implementation. This sequence of courses will be highly encouraged (any preferably eventually required) for any new faculty wanting to adopt service-learning in the future.

What is to Be Achieved at the Session

Participants in “The Evolution of Service-Learning: One Community College’s Vision” session can expect to explore the history of civic engagement efforts on their campuses, the current direction of their programs, and future goals. This will occur through the multiple exercises, shared group discussions, and work on assessment and planning documents. These exercises will be interspersed with shared mistakes and best practices of the GRCC ASLC as it works to redefine its mission. Of particular focus will be discussion and exercises which address the following issues:

- Differentiating service-learning, community service, and civic engagement on your campus
- Exploring the current state of your program’s evolution
- Building a culture and ethic of service on your campus including faculty and student motivation and rewards
- Defining citizenship outcomes in tangible skills tied to general education requirements