



## **Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness: Effective Service Learning and Civic Engagement Strategies**

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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 several of the service learning projects whose humble beginnings in the classroom evolved into local, state and international emergency preparedness exercises. Engaging students in the important tasks of addressing issues on homeland security and domestic preparedness further enables students to become active contributors to society. 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 many disciplines:

- 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. Two Nursing professors served as project faculty leaders responsible for integrating service learning with homeland security topics into their courses during the first and second semester of the project.

### ***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.

An important goal in the project's development is to work with the local community. 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.

4. Students collaborated with the Office of Emergency Management in one local New Jersey town that experienced flood and evacuation problems. The student's needs assessment led to the development of a Disaster Planning Guide for the community.

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, Medical Reserve Corps and Trends in Nursing students during the first year of the SAFE grant evolved into the integration of student participation in the "TopOff 3 (Top Officials) Project", an international-level emergency preparedness exercise which took place in New Jersey, Connecticut, Canada and the United Kingdom, April, 2005. In addition to the initial student projects, many students reported that their participation in the follow-up projects gave them a sense of completion and a job well done.

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.