



Service Learning Challenges: You Can Get There From Here

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It is our belief that challenges are not obstacles to a service learning program, but rather they change the path of the program and bring about new and often unexpected evolution. By remaining flexible, innovative, and willing to accept risk and failure, we worked through our challenges to create a successful and thriving service learning program. In this session we will discuss how our service learning program has evolved over the last two and a half years. Participants will take part in small group discussions to reflect on challenges they are facing and the directions in which these challenges can take them. We will also have participants reflect and discuss what their goals are for the future, how they plan on getting there, and what challenges they foresee that could take them along different paths of evolution and enlightenment.

Howard Community College's (HCC) first service learning program started in 1996 with funding from an AmeriCorps Campus Corps grant. The program was directed by a full time faculty member who was given course release time to run the program. The director supervised a team of AmeriCorps members who designed and implemented service learning projects for students. The program was moderately successful for a few years, but when the AmeriCorps funding went away, so did the program.

In 2003, HCC joined a consortium of four other Maryland Community Colleges (College of Southern Maryland, Carroll Community College, Harford Community College, and Montgomery College) and received a Corporation for National and Community Service Learn and Serve Higher Education Consortia grant. HCC used funds from the grant to hire a full time coordinator and a part time administrative staff member. Based on experiences with the first grant, the college recognized the need for a full time staff person to run the program. Carol Parreco was hired as the coordinator in November 2003.

While developing the program, challenges were faced in recruiting faculty, recruiting community partners, and recruiting student participants. With four faculty members ready to incorporate service learning into their spring courses, the program had to be in place by the beginning of the spring 2004 semester. Carol's first challenge was creating a partnership agreement that would protect the college, but not scare away potential community partners. It took two months to create a one page partnering site agreement that met HCC's risk management requirements. With the partnering site agreement in hand, Carol began meeting with local non-profit and community agencies. By the first day of class, the HCC Center for Service Learning

had four community partners. By the end of the semester, the Center had 65 partnering sites where students could complete their service learning.

The program then faced the challenge of recruiting new faculty for the fall semester. The Learn and Serve grant funds faculty fellow mini grants to full time faculty for designing or modifying courses that integrate service learning into course curriculum. Attracting faculty who are interested in service learning instead of the mini grant was challenging. In order to attract faculty who were interested in service learning and not just the mini grant, the consortia created policies requiring faculty fellows to attend trainings throughout the semester and assist the consortia in collecting data on the program. With these policies in place, recruitment has not been a challenge. In order to recruit new faculty, the coordinator attends faculty meetings, facilitates workshops, and encourages current faculty fellows to recruit new faculty fellows. To date the program has worked with 18 faculty members.

Increasing faculty participation meant that efforts had to be made to increase student participation. One of the primary goals of the HCC Center for Service Learning is to create a culture of service on campus. The center works toward this goal by offering curricular and co-curricular service opportunities. In the majority of the courses that offer service learning, students select their service site using the HCC Service Learning directory of agencies. For many reasons, this is difficult or uncomfortable for our students. To help them in this process, the Center hosts a service learning fair in which our partners come to campus and the students have the opportunity to meet with the agencies in person and sign up for their service learning project. The coordinator also works with student clubs and organizations to plan service learning projects. After these projects, the coordinator facilitates a reflection session. The Center also sponsors Alternative Spring Break (ASB) trips in which students spend their spring break learning about another community through direct service to that community. For two years the Center has attempted to partner with our Admissions and Advising department to plan a day of service for incoming freshman. This summer we will host our first day of service for incoming freshmen. Although we encountered various challenges for two straight years, we have overcome those challenges and are looking forward to a successful day of service and reflection.

In the area of World Languages, the main challenges faced have been 1) finding community partners who understand the ability and purpose of a service learning program at the lower levels of Spanish, and 2) low student participation. The first challenge involved the partner agencies. At HCC, mainly beginning and intermediate Spanish courses are taught. The service learning goals were to have students be in contact with the Latino community of Howard County in order to practice their Spanish and gain a greater understanding of the Latino culture. Yet, as soon as many potential partners heard "Spanish students," they reacted with projects that involved translation at a level much beyond the students' level. The challenge was to find partners and projects that understood the language level of the students and allowed them to use their Spanish skills. The school system and after school programs in the areas of the county with higher Latino populations became the target. The HCC students would work with the school children, helping them with their English, and using Spanish as support. Officially partnering with the school system brought another challenge, this time administrative. It took nearly two months to get a partnership agreement signed by the school system. Yet once the partnership was established, HCC students from disciplines beyond Spanish could serve at the schools. The

current challenge is that several of the schools now refuse to have languages other than English spoken in the classroom, making the HCC Spanish students not welcome, and causing us to withdraw from one elementary school. This challenge is going to take us down the path of finding partners beyond the schools where the Spanish students can serve.

The other main challenge was the low participation of the Spanish students. When service learning was first offered as an option, it was in place of the one-hour lab class all language students are required to take. In the first semester, five students participated and the number decreased in the next two semesters. In the beginning, there was a twenty-hour service requirement with weekly journals due. The teacher turned to the students in her regular (non-Lab) classes. When asked why they did not participate, the students pointed out that the work in Lab class was much less than twenty hours plus journals. Many also pointed out that they did not want to miss Lab class. Lab class was very structured on reviewing and explaining what was being studied in class, while service learning was very unstructured, with real-word language that did not necessarily fit exactly what was learned in class. The students suggested integrating service learning into class rather than the Lab option and making the work load comparable to the projects it would replace. In the fall of 2005, service learning was offered as the class project with alternative non-service learning projects for those who could not participate. About half of each class participated. Thus, the challenge of low participation led to a complete restructuring of the program.