

The Engaged Department: Service Learning at St. Louis Community College- Meramec's English Department

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The objective of this session is to share individual classroom and departmental experiences with other faculty who may find those experiences relevant to their classrooms and/or departments. Each presenter will first discuss what she does in her classroom, starting with the composition 101 class and then creative writing courses. The presenter will discuss the goals of the service learning projects as well as the outcomes. The presenters will use PowerPoint and overheads but will also provide some handouts including examples of student work. After each has spoken about her individual classroom, the instructors will discuss together how the department's Civic Engagement Committee has increased faculty participation in service projects and has fostered greater service learning in English classrooms. Results from departmental surveys will be included. Sufficient time will be left for questions and comments from the audience.

Angela Hamilton's discussion of service in the English composition class will explain *Dining Out for Life*, an annual fundraising event that occurs in over thirty cities nationwide. Every November, St. Louis Effort for AIDS sponsors *Dining Out for Life*, raising thousands of dollars with the involvement of local restaurants, sponsors and celebrities. The money that is raised remains in each city that participates, helping out with the financial burden incurred from developing programs for treating people who have been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS and promoting awareness.

Each year, the Civic Engagement committee at St. Louis Community College at Meramec selects a participating restaurant and invites faculty to dine out that evening.

This event allows for faculty to get together in a more intimate setting and talk about everyday issues as well as discuss the reason we find ourselves together for the evening.

The department chooses to support independent, and usually urban, restaurants as well.

Professor Hamilton also uses this event in English 101 classes. This is a three-part project which includes the following:

1. Students watch a locally-produced video in class (*Voices: Perspectives on HIV and AIDS*), which involves interviews and profiles on those living with the disease in St. Louis.
2. Students are given a list of participating restaurants and are asked to “dine out for life.”
3. Each student who participates writes a reflection on how her opinions and perceptions have changed after watching the video and participating in the fundraiser.

The students discuss their opinions and shock from this new material in class discussions and then use the written assignment to respond in a more personal fashion. Some admit they are scared of this disease and of people who have it. Others mention that they’ve never known anyone who has been affected by it and have felt in the past that it would never touch their lives until they participated in this project. As an instructor, Professor Hamilton can see through their responses how their ideas of HIV and AIDS are changing, perhaps slowly, but even the small steps are significant when dealing with a topic such as this.

Professor Garvey has been incorporating service learning projects into her Poetry Writing class for several semesters. Projects have varied from serving at local Soup

Kitchens to cleaning up parks. Most recently, the students visited Crown Center, a home for seniors in St. Louis, interviewed them, and then wrote portraits of those individuals.

While the students are the ones doing the service, it is apparent through their writing that the projects deepen their learning about both the subject matter of the course and of the needs in the world around them. For example, writing a portrait, an assignment common to poetry and key in building skills in imagery, figurative language, and narrative, is difficult for students who are not given a narrow and specific focus. Since incorporating the assignment with a service learning project, the student success in reaching those goals has increased tenfold. Additionally, the students, who often enter the project with some skepticism (i.e.: some assume the elderly residents will have little to teach them, that they are there to give and not receive), leave with a wealth of information and often with a newfound awareness of the value of people our society often devalues. This semester, the students loved the experience, their poems were among the best they've written, and they have invited the seniors they interviewed to return to campus for a poetry reading and reception. This is the type of engagement with their community that we are aiming for.

Similarly, we aim for such engagement within our department in two distinct ways. Both professors will discuss the work of the Civic Engagement Committee on which they serve. This committee aims to foster greater faculty engagement in service through two means: 1) encouraging service projects within classes; 2) creating projects within the department.

Currently, over half the English faculty (total 30) has incorporated service learning projects into their courses; additionally, we will be hiring several new faculty

this fall and will be conducting presentations on service learning within the department. Part of the collegiality of the department is assignment sharing, which helps tremendously to promote service learning projects.

Engaging the department in projects also reminds faculty of the benefits of service learning while fostering a greater sense of community within an already collegial department. Each semester, the department does at least one service project. In the fall, there is *Dining Out for Life* and the department runs a campus wide fundraiser for *TANF* (*Temporary Assistance for Needy Families*); The *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families* Student Advocate provides services to address the needs of *TANF* students, enabling those students to attain their educational goals. With the money raised, the department purchases gift cards for grocery stores and chains such as Target; the cards are given to *TANF* recipients before the holidays. Each spring, the department holds a waffle ball tournament and barbecue to raise money for *TANF* as well. Fliers for the tournament invite students, faculty and staff to participate. (It should be noted that in the past two years, this tournament has nurtured a healthy competition between departments for the home run trophy. This activity promotes the development of collegial relationships. It is a place where we eat lunch together, swing the bat, raise money and develop relationships with others.) By adopting one organization on campus to support, the department has increased awareness of that organization and built a tradition around these fundraisers.