

The Best of Both Worlds: Implementing Service Learning through Internships

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While service learning has been implemented most commonly in high schools and colleges primarily in a structured class format, the discussion of its implementation in other formats, such as internships, is usually diminished or discouraged in the literature. This study illustrates that the benefits of service learning can be magnified in the format of an internship that extends current discussions and possibilities of service learning into new “spectacular” realms with “unlimited possibilities” (Landry, 2007) that can transform not only students’ lives but also have dramatic beneficial effects on communities. This research study explored a case study of the development of a community college internship program in digital arts with a focus on service learning. This program was examined with respect to the questions of what constitutes a service-learning based internship as evaluated by components described in previous research, how it was developed and what benefits/impact it had on students and the community.

While service learning has been described by a few researchers as occurring in differing teaching formats, such as Tashlik and Tomaszewski (2005) who described volunteerism and Marlin-Bennett (2002) who described internships and other formats as service learning opportunities, most researchers advocate that service learning can only be provided in a class structured as service learning (O’Byrne, 2001; Weigert, 1998; Howard, 1998; Prentice & Garcia, 2000)). Howard (1998) and Weigert (1998) described service learning within a class as differing from “voluntarism, community service and other forms of experiential education” (Weigert, 1998, p. 5). Similarly, Cress et al (2005)

defined service learning as different from volunteerism and internships in that it is “different...service learning is truly a different way of learning...[for] the focus is placed upon connecting course content with actual experience...learning through reflecting on experience is at the center of service-learning courses” (p. 7-8).

While Cress et al (2005), Howard (1998), and Weigert (1998) provide definitions of service learning within a class as differing from volunteerism and internships, some researcher argue that service learning does occur in other teaching formats based on its being “designed to create a service to the community while addressing educational opportunities for students” (Cress, 2005, p.18). Researchers, such as Harkavy and Benson (1998), Speck (2001), Giles and Eycler (1998), and Young et al (2007), assert that service learning should be an integral part of many segments of education. While traditionally internships are performed within a business atmosphere without focus on the characteristics of service learning, i.e., involvement with a service organization and reflection on how the student’s service impacts their community, these same characteristics can be incorporated into service-learning internships when students are placed in service-oriented organizations where reflection is a key component.

The service-learning internships discussed in this case clearly demonstrated that internships can meet the definition of a service learning opportunity in that the needs of both the agency and student were met with the application of the students’ academics to the needs of the community agencies with reflection and, in fact, exceeded the expectations of the agency and student. In these internships, reflection on the value and impact of the services provided by the student were well recognized by the faculty member, student, and agency marketing director who all, again, described the impact as

exceeding what they had expected. While reflection could be optimally captured in a reflection assignment, such as a journal or paper, this case study did demonstrate that reflection activities can be experienced in several ways due in part to the nature of the activities themselves, which echoes Dewey's assertion that the nature of education ideally incorporates the concepts of service learning in that students become better people and citizens through education. Cress et al (2005) described this mission of colleges for "Institutions that require service-learning courses believe that such courses offer a fundamental way to develop and graduate involved citizens" (p. 10). This perspective highlights the importance of incorporating service learning into all aspects of the educational system with the goal to build a better community.

While service-learning internships typically provide the benefits normally associated with business-oriented internships, they were found in this study to provide additional benefits. Additional benefits included the accessing of services by community agencies that they otherwise could not access and the opportunity for faculty, students, and community agencies to perform community service. By the very nature of their unmet needs, community agencies are able to provide internships which afford students enhanced opportunities to apply their academics to creating a better community than may be available from traditional internships. As the faculty member described this,

I think service learning has been really great for a lot of students. I think that we have just touched the surface. This is a way to make this a really spectacular learning experience for the students and all kinds of community services (Landry, 2007).

He further strongly describes that service-learning internships provide the means for students to make a difference in their community; therefore, he believes this illustrates the necessity to make internships a required part of college curriculum,

It is time to step up and make a difference...what we do today is definitely going to make a huge difference on tomorrow. And we can't keep putting it off. Today is the day to make a difference. It really is. I mean we have all of the ingredients to do this and we just can't keep putting it off. It is time to do it now...we need all of this and we cannot do this alone. I think that it is time to give back"

(Landry, 2007).

As further reinforced by Marlin-Bennett (2002), internships are an effective format for incorporating service learning in school curriculums, "In short, the evidence suggest that internships that have a service component are an especially effective teaching tool" (p.385).

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