

## *Blazing Service Learning Partnerships on the “Last Frontier”*

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**General description of the session:** Mat-Su College embarked on a Service Learning adventure during the past few months. The strength of our Service-Learning project is our development of partnerships with non-profit community service agencies. This project initially involved students from the Small Business Management and Refrigeration and Heating Technology disciplines. The students in the former class assisted non-profits with business plans to enhance or expand their options. Students in the latter class applied classroom and laboratory experiences by servicing commercial refrigeration units for businesses being squeezed by the current economic downturn. Having peers showcase these successes is one way of encouraging faculty to reflect on their practice and incorporate civic engagement and/or service-learning into their courses. It also illustrates how these activities can be integrated into the curriculum with a slight shift in perspective and intentional reflection.

Another facet of our proposed project pertains to sustainability with a primary focus on developing a community garden and neighborhood composting resource. Seasonality has precluded “ground breaking,” but we are planning and gathering the necessary resources to implement this project in the coming months. We will also be coordinating with our neighboring community council, local school district, Cooperative Extension office and local gardening groups.

One product of our efforts will be syllabi reflecting the integration of service-learning and civic engagement activities into related courses. Mat-Su College is also offering a Master Gardener course in the fall and our intent is to assemble and develop a cadre of experts willing and able to teach school and community groups about gardening and compost.

**Motivations/foundations for the session:** Alaska's unique climate and variation in daylight combine to create an interesting array of opportunities and challenges as they relate to energy efficiency and sustainability. With Mount Redoubt's continuing eruptions (and disruptions to air traffic) and fuel prices going through the roof, Alaskans are keenly aware of the potential downside of depending on sources outside the State for most of its food and that heavy reliance upon fossil fuels is costly. These circumstances lend themselves to real time service-learning opportunities and lessons that can be incorporated into a number of disciplines or extended to geographically disperse communities. While our initial service-learning and civic engagement activities are small in number and scope, they build a ready foundation for future work.

**Specific learning objectives for the session:** student, staff and faculty groups are all venues for service-learning and civic engagement. The first learning objective of our presentation is to demonstrate how Mat-Su College developed and intends to maintain and expand effective partnerships in service-learning and civic engagement. We have enjoyed some successes as well as learned how we might better structure project design and class assignments in the future. We targeted non-profit organizations in part because of the economic downturn and will elaborate on the benefits of employing this strategy. The sustainability committee and student government have or are engaging in campus awareness initiatives around energy efficiency and sustainability topics and in tandem with academic efforts expand the reach of the project.

A second objective is to describe curriculum changes that are resulting from integrating service learning into courses. These changes are primarily found in the Business, Refrigeration and Heating, and Agriculture disciplines and current strategies as well as ideas being considered for the future will be addressed. Finally, we will elaborate on how service-learning can be an important tool in retaining students and illustrates another way that classroom learning can be closely tied to career exploration and development.

**New directions:** Our initial experience with service-learning and civic engagement suggests that partner agencies are ready and willing to work with us and our students on mutually beneficial projects. Managing expectations and refining our message will be necessary in the future or we could be overwhelmed with responses, some of which are more suitable than others. We anticipate applying lessons learned to date to new disciplines, especially within the Alaska Center for Energy and Power (a University of Alaska statewide initiative) which will be housed on our campus. We look forward to working with our new Wind-Diesel Coordinator who has recent operations management experience with a regional rural electric association and was instrumental in the implementation of a geothermal system at Chena Hot Springs Resort (where temperatures drop to fifty below most winters).

Civic engagement and service-learning are great ancillary resources for the Wind-Diesel coordinator who is charged with facilitating coordination between campuses throughout the state in relation to wind-diesel and other renewable energy technologies. Through our networking we can support creation of outreach programs and benefit from the relationships developed with national labs and universities. Mat-Su College's immediate academic goal is development of the Renewable Energy Occupational Endorsement Certificate program.

Weatherization is a huge issue for Alaska at this time and there are not enough individuals trained to do the assessments to meet demand. This may provide another opportunity to integrate service-learning, academic course work and career development into a unified whole. There seem to be countless opportunities for these endeavors, many of which are closely aligned with Mat-Su College's mission, values and vision.