

Developmental Students Connect for Success!

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Who is the developmental student and how do we best reach them in community college higher education? These are important questions with multifaceted possibilities. Community college populations tend to be more at-risk of drop out and failure than their 4 year college counterparts. These students have more responsibilities than traditional college students. Many are minority first generation college students with little if any support system. There are several concerns including developmental status factors, mental ability, emotional stability, and motivation. In general the current generation is present focused and struggles to plan, study, or engage in future oriented activities important to college success. How do we make a difference? Can service learning be useful with so many challenging factors? Absolutely! Students came alive with hope and desire to make a difference in their community within the models of service learning utilized in the freshman seminar courses taught by the authors. We witnessed these students creating cohesion unfamiliar to students enrolled in our non-service learning courses.

Freshman at San Antonio College are inner city students at a commuter only campus. Over half of the student body are minority and or economically disadvantaged

(Institutional Research SAC Fact Book, Fall 2007). The freshman seminar course reviewed here serves 2,500 students annually. Course content includes college knowledge, student academic skills, personal growth and emotional intelligence. The at-risk freshmen are often skeptical of their own success.

Service learning changes how the student evaluates their role as a student and a citizen. The hidden beauty of service learning in a freshman seminar course is the broad spectrum of course content. The central aim of the seminar course is to prepare this at-risk population to succeed in the college and adult life environment they now find themselves in. We will discuss three project formats, the benefits they produce and the drawbacks encountered.

Project A was a collaboration with the San Antonio Food Bank and St. Vincent De Paul homeless kitchen. The class as a whole, to include the instructor, participated in both phases. In phase one, the class spent four hours at the San Antonio Food Bank preparing consumables and non-edible donations for delivery to community agencies that disperse the goods to the needy. The food bank staff educated students on the day to day operations of the food bank and how community agencies from all over the county and surrounding areas work together to get the donated goods to the needy. The class was also informed about proper nutrition and the consequences of malnourishment. The students worked together, developed friendships, and were exposed to community members who gave their time to serve their community altruistically.

In phase two of the service learning project, the class met early in the morning at St. Vincent De Paul kitchen for the homeless. This is one agency that receives the food distributed by the food bank. The students were responsible for preparing food for and serving approximately seventy-five individuals. The impact of knowing that the meal they served might be the only meal the homeless citizens might receive for the day hit the students sharply. Just arriving at the kitchen, which is located down town next to a homeless shelter, was an eye opening experience for many students. Most had never interacted with homeless individuals and had been able to stay emotionally distant from the issue. Several students were profoundly affected by seeing families with children in line for food. They also commented on how polite everyone was and how they did not expect to feel the way they did.

Project B was in cooperation with the San Antonio Youth Literacy program. In this project students were individually assigned to an elementary school of their choice where they were to read to two children weekly for 1 hour each. They received training on the project in the classroom. Then they were given the responsibility to call the project coordinator to arrange a time they could meet at the assigned school to begin their assignment. The students were to sign in each week they met with their assigned students and document their reading activity.

Project C collaborated with Salvation Army to help run their annual Shoe-In Project where needy children in the community are identified and given a shoe shopping day at the Salvation Army. Initially, the class went to help create and process

the mailing notification of about 2,000 children. They returned a second time to help children try on shoes and take home some pride. The impact of connecting to the needy families left a deep impression on the class.

During and after each service learning event, students participated in reflection exercises and journal writing in which key benefits surfaced. As the students volunteered and witnessed other volunteers from their community working, their perception of citizenship and personal responsibility was enhanced. The instructor noticed the increased peer interactions of service learning students to non-service learning students. There also existed a closer connection to the instructor in projects where the instructor participated with the students. The number one positive benefit that surfaced amongst student reflections was making friends with their peers. This increase in supportive relationships created a network students could utilize when facing challenges in life and school.

Many students verbalized in class and on formal reflection pieces that they had used community aid themselves in the past and were excited to be able to give back. Most did not view themselves as able to contribute or didn't ever consider why they would want to prior to their project. The emotional intelligence aspect is when we choose to behave in more personally responsible ways. Here students started as consumers of society, change to a producers, or at the least entered into a more balanced relationship with their community as a whole. Some such inspired students went on to design future independent volunteer projects.

All success is not without its limitations. Project B (San Antonio Youth Literacy Program) that lacked group participation and instructor involvement had poor participation and feedback. Only four students from the class completed the original reading projects. The majority participated in an alternate service learning assignment that involved being with a group. Most students as a whole were not excited about the additional time the service learning class assignment required at the onset of the semester. When given an option, students not experienced with service learning courses will most often choose not to participate in a project. Willingness to participate increased substantially when a less desirable alternative to the project was presented. Ninety three percent of students after the project stated they would choose service learning again.

The results of involving freshmen seminar course developmental students in service learning projects have proven fruitful to the maturity of emotional intelligence. The gains in empowerment, civic responsibility, and peer connections are clearly demonstrated and expressed by the students. Practical lessons the authors have derived from these service learning experiences include service learning projects work best where the class participates as a group in addition to the instructor participating alongside them. Mandatory participation is preferred or the presence of a significantly less desirable assignment as the alternate choice to participating in the service learning project. Overall, the instructors benefitted from the projects as much as the class. It was a wonderful experience to witness students serve their community, grow as citizens and decide they want to make a difference in their world.

Bibliography

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