

The Student Voice: A Qualitative Reflection of a Service-Learning Experience

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Context:

Over the past 40 years, there has been a resurgence of the “new student” or “first-year student” success course on college campuses (Saunders & Romm, 2008). While the offerings may vary depending on institutional factors – public vs. private, two-year vs. four-year, large vs. small – the goal of helping students to persist and become engaged in college life remain evident. One intervention that has been used to address these twin needs has been academic courses with service-learning experiences. The increase in service-learning First-Year Experience (FYE) courses has been significant between 2003 (22.7%) and 2006 (40.2%) (Griffin, Romm & Tobolowsky, 2008, p. 23). Yet, despite the increase, only 25 (13.6%) of two-year respondents indicated that a service-learning FYE course was offered at their institution.

This service-learning FYE course was created as a pilot to address the need for helping two-year students understand their role as citizen-leaders. Arthur Chickering (2000) commented, “[b]ecause academic courses provide the foundation for the college experience, teaching in ways that build relationships and a sense of community among students is especially important for commuter students” (p. 23). Although there are opportunities available for Northern Virginia Community College students to participate in service activities, there was a desire to formalize and measure the experience.

Design of the Course:

The service-learning experience was embedded in one of the college’s First-Year Experience (FYE) courses. The Leadership Student Success course (SDV 109) is a one-credit course designed to introduce leadership theories while encouraging student to apply newly developed skills during interactions with campus and community organizations. The 12-week course was taught using a small group seminar format and met once a week for approximately 75 minutes. The service-learning component was designed as a direct-service community-based experience.

The community partners included a local middle school and representation from the local Board of Supervisors (county governing board). After using the StrengthsQuest inventory to identify their major areas of contribution, the class of ten students was divided into two groups. Representatives from each group attended a kick-off meeting to identify the concerns and challenges which existed at the school.

The partnering middle school is located in the Sugarland Run district of Loudoun County, VA. With almost 900 students, approximately 40% (356) of the population is non-white with the majority identifying with the Hispanic ethnic group (2008 Loudoun County Public Schools data). Despite an attendance and graduation rate of 94% and 61%, respectively, the middle school did not meet the goal for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Challenges exist for students in the following categories: Black, Hispanic, limited English proficient, disadvantaged, and those with disabilities.

Given the close proximity to NOVA-Loudoun, the opportunity of a partnership was explored. The desire of middle school administrators was to gain assistance with stressing the importance and the role of education. As an advocate for the school and the district, a Loudoun County Supervisor facilitated a partnership between representatives from NOVA-Loudoun and the local middle school.

Qualitative Reflection:

One week before the end of the semester, the students were asked to journal about their experiences. They posted the entries on the course Blackboard Discussion site and provided feedback on at least two other entries. The feedback could support or question the journal entry posted by the student originator. Six out of the nine students participated in the optional qualitative feedback assignment. After a review of the data, three themes emerged – Positive Results, Conflict of Expectations, and Breakdown.

The first theme of “Positive Results” identifies how the students realized their growth as a result of the service-learning experience. “Because community-based learning environment[s] energize, enhance, and make real the course curricula, students typically report significant growth in their abilities to communicate with diverse audiences in multiple ways, enhancement of leadership and project management skills, and development of their capacities for understanding themselves in relation to others who are both similar to and different from themselves” (Reitenauer et. al., 2005, p.17). In the following excerpts, three students revealed their excitement:

At first it felt overwhelming, but this leads me to another aspect of the course that I enjoyed: I'm not trying to be corny, but I really do feel like a more effective individual for having completed this course and done all the work. The program was overwhelming at first, but rather than feeling angry that I was locked into trying to do this, I tried to focus on a positive vision and I feel really proud of what my group and I put together for our program. (Student Post)

I feel that the students made this class what it was, and I wouldn't have taken it with any other student body. The students brought a positive, energetic attitude towards the class and the materials that were presented. Also I the diversity made me appreciate the class. When I state diversity, I am talking about diversity in opinions and morals and how each of us are driven in different ways which created conflict but all of us had the maturity and compassion to accept each other as a unique individual. (Student Post)

Also, I agree about the experience working with groups. I dreaded this at first, but it turned out to be great. I really enjoyed working with my group and the end result of all the things we individually brought to the table and how the pieces fit together. I did not put this in my post, but this class allowed me to appreciate and actually ENJOY a group project, probably for the first time in my entire academic career. (Student Post)

The second theme of “Challenges” identifies the outcomes that cause the service-learning experience to be viewed as a less-than-perfect experience. Students often have a rose-colored view of what the experience will be like and find themselves trying to make meaning of the complexity of the experience as they move through the course. Cress (2005) warns of this commenting, “[s]ervice-learning courses should not be viewed as an educational utopia. Personality conflict can arise, students may lack the ability to deal with others who are different

from themselves, community partners may not follow through on their commitments, and group members may not meet their responsibilities” (p. 14).

I am not used to working with others but after this experience I should say that it is exciting. Even though things did not go as planned my group and I stayed focused. We had a few problems with [the middle school] having the kids ready but we were positive and kept on coming up with new leadership activities. (Student Post)

Also the diversity made me appreciate the class. When I state diversity, I am talking about diversity in opinions and morals and how each of us are driven in different ways which created conflict but all of us had the maturity and compassion to accept each other as a unique individual. (Student Post)

First I want to say that you guys made such a good team. Even when we were having issues, you all jumped to the wheel and offered to help each other out, even the Fantastic Four, who weren't even in our group, decided to pitch in, so thanks for that too!!(Student Post)

The third and final theme is categorized “Difficult Solutions.” “Because service-learning courses are collaborations between persons (and groups of persons) with a variety of needs and resources, inevitably breakdown in the process will occur. Students, faculty, and community partners may choose to view these glitches as fatal to the collaborative process and, as a result, shirk their commitment to the shared endeavor” (Cress, 2005, p.24). In this experience, the college students were required to put in additional time to make things work according to their plan. Due to the need to present final recommendations (for sustainability) of the program, they were not able to “shirk” their responsibilities. Yet instead of identifying their own shortcomings, or that of the community partner, the students viewed the “clean-up work” as an external solution and hence shared the following:

In the future, while I am over being bitter about all the work involved in this one credit course (hey, I pursued it, enrolled in it, and chose not to drop it), I would explore offering this course as a three credit course. (Student Post)

I think this would better encourage developing a more comprehensive, well thought-out, and involved program at [the middle school]. There is a lot of work that goes into this kind of project, and I think that next time, this class needs to offer more than just a one credit incentive to their students to motivate them more. (Student Post)

I would make the class worth more credits. I was a little annoyed at the sheer amount of work and out of class effort I put into this class only to receive 1 credit. (Student Post)

Ultimately the students realized the impact they made in the community and six of the nine indicated a desire to continue the program. They acknowledged the service-learning experience was more than an assignment, it was a deliberate application of “academic knowledge and skills to positively transform [them]selves, others and [the] organization” (Cress, 2005, p.12). Two students shared:

This course influenced my thinking especially on leadership styles. Now I have a better idea of what leaders do and how they conduct themselves. It also changed the way I felt about volunteer work, I used to think that it was boring and a waste of time but after

spending one day with those kids I realized that volunteer work is very important especially in a program like ours. Those kids really wanted to be there and hear what we had to say, and I am sure we influenced them and motivated them in being responsible leaders. (Student Post)

I really look forward to continuing next semester, and helping the community in other ways. (Student Post)

Next Steps:

The course is scheduled to be offered during the Fall 2009 semester with a maximum enrollment of 15 students. The community partners will be invited to play an instrumental role in the development of the leadership topics that will be covered. The evaluation, or feedback, from and between the students and community partners will also be facilitated on a weekly basis instead of at the conclusion of the experience. This will provide an opportunity for earlier interventions to help all make meaning of shared successes and challenges.

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